

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

JUNE

25c



TEN FICTION BULL'S EYES!
FEATURE STORY

• DEATH RIDES THIS ROAD!

by GEORGE
CASSIDY

• THE DEVIL'S DRAW

by G. D. SHIRREFFS

- HARRISON
- SHOTWELL
- LAVANWAY
- JACKSON
- CREWE
- RAINET
- CLAYBOURNE
- KERMIT



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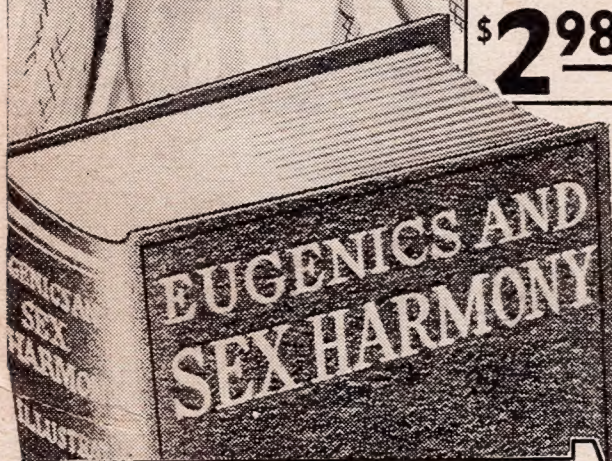
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VOLUME 49

JUNE, 1954

NUMBER 1

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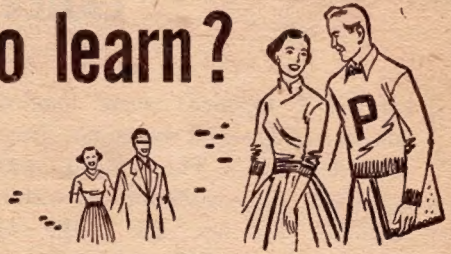
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GOLD MINER'S COURT

By

LANCE KERMIT

USUALLY frontier courts handed down speedy—and sometimes drastic—decisions. The culprit was tried, convicted, and sentenced, all within a few minutes. But one case in the old Mother Lode country of California, in the year 1850, lasted for some hours—because it ended in a poker game.

A fellow known as Frenchy had panned and dug, and he had cached his gold in an old tunnel, only to come one day and find it gone. Gasping, he staggered into a saloon, where, fired by whisky and desire, he offered one-half his gold to anybody who found it and the thief or thieves that had stolen it. This done, he proceeded to drown his pain and sense of loss with alcohol.

The town marshal, wanting some extra whisky money, promptly brought in three young men, all accused of robbing Frenchy of his gold. When informed of this triple arrest, Frenchy took another drink, swore in French, and vowed that speedy justice would result, that all three were guilty, and that the trio should be hanged.

"Git together the jedge an' a jury of peers. Thet young gambler over there—he's my attorney. Thet young bartender over there—he's a smart one—he can be shyster for them young men. We gotta make this legal, men."

"It's gotta be legal," the marshal substantiated. He wiped his lips and looked at a bottle. "How about a case of whisky at the trial?"

"We take three cases with us," Frenchy said. "An' they're on me. We need lots of liquor when we see them three gold-thieves hang at the end of the ropes!"

Accordingly the miners—and three cases

of red-eye—retired to the far end of town where the justice-of-the-peace had set up his "court"—a log table under a big live-oak tree.

The justice was a terribly fat man. Once he had been a miner, but he had drunk so much and worked so little he had gotten too obese to mine. Though he couldn't bend over to pick up a nugget, he could bend to pick up a bottle. That was because the bottle had a neck on it and was therefore easier to grasp.

The judge banged with his "gavel," which was a whisky bottle filled with sand. He called the court to order and read the charges against the three young miners, who were rather frightened by the enormity of the charge against them—for in those hectic days a gold pirate was hanged by his neck until dead.

"Be ye men guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty."

Again, the gavel pounded. "When ye speak to me, ye speak to the duly elected arm of the Law, an' ye are to refer to me as 'Your Honor' at all times. Is thet clear?"

"It is, Your Honor."

"Git to work, attorneys."

The trial set a record on one point: it dragged on for almost three hours. Up to this point the trials had been brief and to the point. Two brilliant "attorneys"—a bartender and a gambler—argued legal "points."

The jury watched and listened, and bottles went around. After three hours, one man was acquitted, much to the judge's disapproval. The wrangling continued, the "lawyers" insulted each other, and more

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

bottles were uncorked. Finally, all three were acquitted.

The judge could hardly believe his ears. He stared at the jury in surprise. "You mean—you're turnin' them gold thieves loose, jury?"

"We is?"

The judge pondered on this point. The "attorneys", their hard names forgotten, were enjoying a drink from the same bottle, and were comparing cases—they liked their new jobs, and they wondered if they should open an "office" and hang out a "shingle" together.

"Them men ain't done nothin' wrong," the jury foreman said. "They're jes' carryin' out their legal jobs of bein' honest, Gawd-fearin' miners. The gold found on them is their gold, not Froggie's."

The judge saw he was out-voted. Still, he had to get his paws onto some dust, and he could not afford to let this opportunity go by with no reward to his person, or his office.

He hammered and delivered his verdict. Froggie was to take one-half of the gold, and at this verdict, the crowd cheered, but the Frenchman did not cheer. He protested that the gold was all his. The three youths swore they had wrung it from the California earth through hard toil. The "lawyers" chipped in, and it looked more like a fight than a "court of justice."

The judge was worried. He felt his "fee" slipping. Finally, after things quieted down, he divided the other half between his court, the two "lawyers", and the three accused.

This brought on another near riot. Only by effort was bloodshed averted. The judge, now perspiring freely, banged and hollered, but he was too fat to stand up—he merely sat on his log chair and hollered and banged with the whisky bottle. Finally, some measure of sanity and quiet was restored.

"Men, you're makin' this hard on your jedge. I'm not Solymon, miners. We're all dissatisfied. So, I have a way to end

this, to the satisfaction of all of ye concerned."

A suspicious air gripped the crowd. The judge was one always to feather his own nest, always in the cause of "the court." But although "the court" was, in sense, a legal arm of the people, the people never got the money—that always ended up in the heavy judge's possession.

"What be this plan?" a miner asked slowly.

The judge waved a fat palm. "Ye are all gamblin' men," he intoned. "If you weren't gamblin' men, you'd never have left soft jobs an' your homes back east to fight an' claw an' dig for yeller California gold." At times, the judge could get quite eloquent, especially when fired by Sacramento rotgut. "An' thet kerect, miners?"

A shout of approval was his answer.

The judge nodded his three chins. "We are gathered here as a court of law. In my own opinion I believe the verdict was a miscarriage of justice." At this, the three young men openly winced. "But the verdict will be abided by in this court of law. But Frenchy should be given a chance to get back all his dust—all of it, I tells you."

"How?" Frenchy asked.

"A poker game. We all get in a poker game. We use only the Frog's gold. We play until somebody has won it all."

Frenchy said, "I'm fer it."

So were all others concerned—the three "gold thieves", the "lawyers", and the jury. The game started. For some reason, the judge seemed to be lucky—inside of a few hours, he had won all the dust. Frenchy was broke, so were the others. Only then did His Honor laboriously raise his fatty height to his creaking upright position.

His eyes, half-hidden in fat, looked at the company. They moved from man to man and then settled on the gold—his gold.

"Court is dismissed an' closed," he intoned, hands going out for the dust-covered pokes.

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CASE NO. 3. Male, aged 23 years. BED-WETTING since birth. Many forms of treatment failed. Unable to accept invitation to sleep out over-night. Recently married, and embarrassed by habit. After formula taken, wet bed the first two nights but never since that time.



CASE NO. 4. Girl, aged 6 years. Wet bed since infancy. Nervous, irritable. DRY-TABS formula administered for regular period. BED-WETTING stopped almost immediately. Slight relapse. Formula administered again. Child responded immediately once more, and history reveals no further relapse.



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HARD LUCK GUNHAND

By
JOHN CLAYBOURNE



THE March wind was cold as it came across the cacti and brush of this high Arizona desert. And Indian Charlie, holding the get-a-way broncs in the alley, there in Tombstone, shivered despite his buckskin jacket.

The halfbreed trembled. He realized it was cold . . . but not that cold. His nerves were tense. Why didn't they get-it over with pronto?

Two gold pieces, along with some silver, were heavy in Indian Charlie's shirt pocket. Twenty five dollars. His pay for holding the horses while the gang built an ambush for Morgan Earp. Morgan Earp, the brother of that famous gunman-lawman, Wyatt Earp. Morgan Earp, who was marked to die by the gang.

Suddenly, without warning, the guns roared. Glass cascaded as bullets shattered it. They came on the run—four killers who wanted fast horseflesh. Panting, running, guns still palmed.

"We gotta git outa here. We killed him, Indian Charlie!"

"No say my name, please!"

They got out of Tombstone on roaring hoofs. Behind them a gun lifted its length and barked a throaty report. Again and again it fired until it was empty. That was Wyatt Earp, shooting at his brother's ambushers.

"We got him," one of the killers told Indian Charlie, whose real name, history records, was Florentino Cruz. "He was bendin' over to take a shot—they was shootin' pool, savvy? We fired through the window. We saw him go down. The gent he was playing pool with—looked like George Berry—he fell down, too."

"George Berry? He no do no wrong

against us. George nice fellow—I like him. You shoot Berry, too?"

Yes, Berry had got shot. Accidentally, of course, for a bullet had evidently gone through Morgan Earp, and had hit Berry. Everybody was sorry about that.

"A good man would never associate with the Earps. That means Berry had some rat in him, too."

Indian Charlie shivered. "Always I have the bad luck," he said. "Berry, he have bad luck—he be with Morgan. But my luck, she ees always bad."

"Listen to him," an outlaw jeered. "You got twenty five bucks, didn't you?"

"Si, twenty five bucks, yes."

They holed up at a ranch owned by one of the gang. Between this gang and the Earps, the lawmen, was a hard feud. When morning came a gang member rode in to tell them that both George Berry and Morgan Earp were dead. Berry had died instantly, and Earp had lived a few minutes.

THE gang split up. Wyatt Earp was on its trail.

Some headed south in a hurry, broncs kicking sand toward the Mexican Border. Indian Charlie, along with Pete Spence, holed up in Spence's ranch, out of Tombstone some distance. Here Spence made a disastrous mistake. He beat up his wife. He did a good job. The woman had some black eyes. Worse than that, she went to Tombstone, where she reported the affair to Wyatt Earp. She also reported that Indian Charlie and her husband had been in on the ambushing of Morgan Earp. Where were Indian Charlie and her husband now? Earp wanted to know. Why,

(Continued on page 111)

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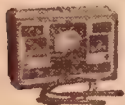
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DEATH RIDES

By GEORGE CASSIDY



"Who do you want killed?"
he asked.

THIRTY miles from Muleshoe, another dirt road branched off from the main wagon road. The big freight wagon with its six-team hitch pulled up. The teamster said, "I turn off here."

Bud Coe reached for his saddle, feeling the heat of it as he hefted it to a muscular shoulder. "Thanks," he said and jumped

down, using a broad-rimmed wheel for a step.

The weight of the saddle jarred his side, and he felt perspiration burn into the ragged bullet track that rimmed his middle rib. He stood there in the blazing sun, watching the creaking freight wagon move down the road.

THIS ROAD



***Bud Coe's one purpose in life was to hunt down
the man who robbed him of everything he had—
except a quick gun in a loose holster!***

There was an adobe shack in the forks of the road. Coe's feet scuffed the sand toward the shack. He dropped his saddle beside the door, fingering the two pieces of silver in his pocket as he rapped with hard knuckles. He hadn't eaten since early morning.

A dark-haired, dark-skinned rather bux-

om woman opened the door. She looked at him, and her eyes took on a scared look. She said something in Mexican. She said it so fast Coe didn't get it.

He tried to relax the hard-drawn, bitter lines about his mouth. He put a smile on his tobacco-brown face and tried to make it come out his cold gray eyes. He jingled the

coins in his pocket and said in his slow, halting Spanish, "I know this is not an inn, *Senorita*, but I'm hungry. I'll pay."

She responded with a slow, shy smile and some of the fright left her eyes. "It's *Senora*," she said shyly, "and my husband will be here soon."

"Ah," said Coe, "I'd never dreamed it. You look so—so young." It was a lie, and Coe found it difficult. "I'm thirsty, too, *Senora*," he added.

She gave him a long look and was visibly reassured by what she saw. Coe had an honest face that inspired confidence. "You do not mind waiting for my husband?"

"A thousand thanks, *Senora*," Coe said, "but I'm in a hurry."

She stepped back, and he went in and left the heat outside the thick adobe walls.

The interior of the shack was dim and cool and clean. He sat at a clean-scrubbed table, and she brought him frijoles and beans. The frijoles were tough and the beans cold, but he ate hungrily and enjoyed it. She watched him with wide, dark eyes.

"Is there must traveling on this road?"

"*Si*. But in midday, no."

"That makes sense," Coe said in English. He followed the path of her gaze, seeing her widening look. Red stained his shirt. He cursed mentally. Jumping from the freight wagon had caused the furrow to open and bleed.

"Do not be alarmed; *Senora*," he said hastily. "It's but a slight hurt I got when my horse fell." He hated to lie, and he put partial truth into his words.

She was scared again, and he wanted to reassure her. But she said, "Come," and he followed her across the room and through the rear door. Leafy vines came up over a crude framework built against the adobe shack. A fat brown baby lay sleeping in a rough cradle. She indicated a pallet beside the cradle and motioned for him to lie there.

He stripped off his shirt and looked. The raw red furrow had begun to scab over.

He swabbed at it for a moment with a *bandana*, but it continued to bleed.

The woman came out and motioned him to lie back on the straw pallet beside the cradle. He lay down, and his gun gouged him. He slipped it out of its holster and laid it under the cradle within easy reach. He stretched out and relaxed, feeling her soft cool fingers on his skin.

She placed something cooling on his side and bound it up. She went into the shack again and returned with a brown bottle. She gave him the bottle and tipped her head, motioning for him to drink. He tilted the bottle and tasted some strange, bitter potion that made him grimace. He lay back on the pallet, resting. He felt the bitter stuff in his stomach, warming and soothing. He gave himself up to the weariness of his mind and body. Far away he seemed to hear the jangle of bit chains and the creak of saddle leather, but he hadn't the strength nor will power to rouse, and he slept.

The thin cry of the baby awakened him. It was dark and a light hot wind stirred the vines. The baby cried fretfully. He sat up and reached for his gun and slipped it back in its scabbard. He got to his knees and poked a finger at the plump baby. The baby stopped crying. Coe raised to his feet. He felt better, much better. He heard voices, and he went to the door on tip-toe and listened. He heard a woman's pleading voice and then sounds of scuffling feet.

Coe went in through the door and into the yellow candle light. A big man had the Mexican woman in his arms, bending her backward, while she clawed at his face.

Coe stepped in close and jabbed his gun hard into the man's back.

"Let her go," he said coldly.

The man stiffened and straightened, his hands going up quickly. The Mexican woman ran into the corner of the room and turned, her brown face terror stricken.

The man was huge, with bulky shoulders. His head was too big for his immense neck, and coarse black hair sprouted above

the top of a dirty, collarless shirt. His eyes were like small black buttons, and they held a mean but scared look.

"I didn't mean nothin'," he mumbled. "She's jes' a Mex."

"I don't mean nothing, either," said Coe. He moved in, quick as a cat and raised his gun.

"No, no!" cried the Mexican woman.

Coe stepped back and dropped his gun. "You should be whipped with a pistol," he said coldly.

The big man said, "She—she, oh, hell, man, she's—"

Coe ignored him. "He hurt you?" he asked the woman.

She came out of the corner, shaking her head. "*Senor* James gives work to my husband sometimes," she said.

"That makes it all right for you to wrestle her?"

"Sure," James said eagerly. "I jus' stopped t' see if Felipe would help me with my horse herd. I'm alluz stoppin' in and Maria and me was just playin'—"

Coe looked from one to the other and moved his shoulders.

"She told me you ain't got a hoss," James said. "Maybe so you'd like to help me into Muleshoe—if you goin' that way. I'll pay you ten bucks."

AT THE mention of a horse herd, Coe's interest quickened. "What you got?" he asked. He wanted to get to Muleshoe too, and this was as quick a way as any. He didn't care for James, but a ride was a ride. And he wanted a look at James' horses.

"Hosses for Army remount," said James. "Come out an' look."

Coe put his gun away and followed the big man outside. A string stretched out into the darkness. They were hooked to a light wagon, twenty teams hooked together with rope and iron rings. He struck a match and looked at the brands of a couple of horses and found them strange to him. "Suits me," he said.

"Off-wheeler went lame," said James. "I'll switch 'im." He took out a big gray about the middle of the string and led the animal back and switched him into the off-wheel position. He put the lame off-wheeler in the gray's place and came back where Coe waited silently.

Coe heard a deep gurgle and heard James smack his lips. The big man passed him a bottle.

"Better have one before we leave," he said, "it's a long ol' ride t' Muleshoe."

Coe took the bottle and had a long pull and then another. The liquor was cheap and burned like fire. He passed the bottle back to James.

"I'll ride the off-leader," James said, "an' you get on the gray. Don't let 'em get goin' too fast now. Wish I had somebuddy on that wagon to brake."

"I'll throw my saddle in," said Coe. "And you could lock all four wheels on that wagon, and it wouldn't make any difference."

"Hurry now, man," James said. "I'm two days late as 'tis."

"You said something about ten dollars pay," Coe said coolly.

The fat man brought out a purse and in the dim light of the shack fished around and brought out two gold pieces. He dropped them reluctantly in Coe's outstretched hand. "You're a quick one," he chuckled. "Ain't aimin' to pry, but where's your horse?"

"Dead," said Coe. "Broke his leg. Shot him." He moved toward the shack. "Back in a minute."

He gave Maria a five dollar gold piece. Her eyes widened, and she smiled.

"Who's this man?" he asked her.

Her eyes rolled toward the sky. "Leo James is a bad man," she said. *Malo hombre*. "He buy and sell horses to Army. You go with him, yes?"

Coe nodded.

"My Felipe do not trust him," she whispered. "You watch."

"Thanks, Maria," Coe said. "Thanks for the food—and the doctorin', too."

She smiled at him, a warm smile that touched him somehow. She said softly, "Go with God, *Senor*."

He gave her a bleak grin and went out into the night. Something moved beside the door, and a gun appeared in Coe's hand.

"Hey, dammit, it's me," James swore.

Coe laughed shortly. "You're liable to get shot sneaking 'round like that."

"Shore touchy," James grumbled. Suspicion entered his voice. "Ain't on the dodge, air you?"

Coe said, "No," and picked up his saddle and walked to the wagon. He threw the saddle in and went around the wagon and mounted the gray. James stood looking up at him.

"What's eatin' you, man?" he asked. "Whyn't you tell me? Mebbe I could help you."

"Nothing bothering me five thousand couldn't cure," Coe said.

The big man was silent. Coe could feel he waited for him to continue. He thought, What the hell—why not? Maybe it would help. He said, "I saw a horse ranch up around Flagstaff. Needed some dough to stock up. Had a chance to supply army remounts, just like you're doing. Except I'd raise 'em myself instead of buyin'—or stealin'."

James made a low noise that could have been a growl of protest.

Coe reached for his tobacco sack and fashioned a cigaret. He scratched a match on the saddle, and the gray jumped. Coe's face was hard and bitter in the yellow light of the match. Sweat beads stood out on his forehead.

"I took a guy in as my partner. I'd borrowed five thousand on my place and what stock I had. This other feller, Kirby Lander, put up two thousand. He's supposed to be a real wrangler. And he had connections with the army purchasing agent."

He thought of Kirby Lander then, and the name made his stomach ball up into a hard knot and rage rose in him. Good-looking Kirby Lander, with his hand-stitched boots and fifty-dollar Stetson. The man who liked everybody and had a way with the girls at the Saturday night dances. The man he'd given his friendship to—He tossed his cigaret away.

"Kirby was my friend and I trusted him. We put our dough in th' bank and—"

"Friend Lander grabbed it and vamoosed," James finished.

"How'd you figger that?" Coe asked with a cynical drawl.

James was silent and then he said, "You got a lead on this Kirby Lander? He's in Muleshoe, maybe?"

"Nope. I'm goin' on with my plans alone. But I gotta have dough, to pay the bank and get more stock. I know a man in Muleshoe who'll stake me."

"Maria told me you'd been shot," James said.

"Uh-huh," Coe said coolly. "Lander took what horses I had, too. I nearly caught up with him."

James shivered. "Who's your man in Muleshoe?"

Coe leaned from the saddle. "Friend, you want to know too damn much. You want me to ride for you or not?"

"Just thinkin'," James said. "That's a right smart bunch o' money for a man to dig up."

"He's got it," said Coe, thinking of Jess Hamilton. "We rode together a few years back. He's saved my life—and I've done him a favor or two."

"He know you're comin'?"

"No." Coe stood up in his stirrups. "God dammit, if you're through pumpin' me, let's go."

James grunted and moved off into the darkness. He called out, "All right, let's move 'em." The horse herd moved ahead on the road to Muleshoe.

The moon came up, a brilliant yellow

over the dark rim of the mountains behind them. Coe could see the bulk of the big man ahead through a haze of dust. He moved his neckerchief up over his mouth and nose and settled his body to the motion of his mount.

Somewhere on the road, about midnight. James called a halt and dismounted from the off-leader. He staggered a little as he came back to where Coe sat the gray in stony silence.

"Better have another drink," said James and handed the bottle up to Coe. It was nearly empty. Coe took the bottle and tossed it out into the darkness.

"What'd you do that for?" James cried. "There's a drink left in that bottle."

Coe dismounted. "You're drunk now," he said. "Another drink and you'd go to sleep, and I don't know the road."

James was silent for a long moment. Then he said, "If we're gonna have any trouble, it'll be just ahead."

"Trouble? What kind of trouble?" Coe fumbled for the makings. He fashioned a cigaret and when he lighted it James hadn't answered. Coe held up the light and saw the fat man's face was a pale gray.

"You hadn't ought t' be showin' a light," he whined.

Coe shook out the match. "What're you scared of, James?"

"'Paches. Little bunch broke out th' reservation and raisin' hell. They like Army hosses."

"The best," Coe agreed. "That ten dollars cover this?"

"We get through without losin' any, I'll give you a hundred more," James said hurriedly.

Coe was silent.

James said, "I'll get you a horse, too. Not one o' these, but a good one."

"What'd you expect and what're you goin' to do about it?" Coe asked. He ground out his cigaret beneath his heel.

"The road goes through a little draw up ahead," James said. "If they're gonna

jump us, it'll be in there. If they do, we'll make a run fer it. That's why I got the hosses rigged like this. Can run hell out of 'em and still keep 'em together."

Coe nodded. He'd suspected something like that.

"All right," he said. "Now you can stop lyin'."

"What d' ye' mean?"

"You know what I mean. Apaches don't get out at night."

"These are a bunch o' half-breeds," James said, and his voice was sullen.

"All right," said Coe after a long silence. He stepped up into his saddle. "Let's get 'em movin'."

The big man lumbered off. In a few moments he called back, "Let's go."

They came into the shallow draw at a trot. The ground was hard here and the dust not as thick. They went up a rise, and the draw turned and narrowed. They got well into the narrow stretch, and ahead Coe could see it spread out into a small valley. A red eye winked through the darkness.

He heard a hoarse yell from ahead. It was James. "Get 'em runnin'," he shouted. "Get 'em goin' hard."

Coe spurred the gray and beat at its mate with his hat. The horses broke into a pounding gallop, and behind him Coe could hear the wagon bouncing. A dark mass moved up on his right, and at that moment he saw the red embers of a campfire. The dark mass moved away and when the thunder reached his ears, he realized it was a horse herd. The campfire blazed up and he could see men rolling out of their blankets.

A rider swerved in, the night man, Coe though, trying to cut the loose herd away from the campfire. The men around the campfire were running about trying to catch up a mount. A gun boomed off somewhere in the night and then they were past the campfire and out in the darkness. The team kept running.

CHAPTER

2

Bullet Business

It was rosy, pearly dawn when they rode into Muleshoe. The town was asleep, its false-fronted stores dark. A lone pony stood head-down at a hitch-rail in front of the Bird Cage Saloon; its owner slumped on the boardwalk.

They went on through the short stretch of town, the rumble of hooves loud between the buildings. James pulled up the off-leader at a run-down corral on the river bank. There was a hay rick beside the corral and a lean-to near that. James got down and come back, stretching and rubbing his face with his hands. "That's slicker'n a maverick," he said with satisfaction in his voice.

Coe stepped to the ground and said, "I ought to knock your head off."

James grinned, showing short strained teeth. "Hell, man, you got a hundred and a horse comin'. What're you kickin' about?"

"Who was it? Your competition?"

"You catch on quick. Help me turn 'em in, and I'll buy your breakfast."

Coe silently unhooked the horses two at a time and turned them into the corral. When he finished, James was forking hay over the bars to the tired and hungry horses. The sun was well up, and smoke rose from a few shacks across the river. Back of him, toward town, Coe could hear the clanging ring of a hammer on an anvil.

James waddled out of the corral. A few wisps of hay clung to his clothing. He said, "I gotta see a feller. You come with me. Then we'll eat."

"I'll get breakfast," Coe said, "and meet you right here."

James made an impatient gesture. "Won't take long," he said. "An' I wantcha to meet this feller."

Coe shrugged. He didn't feel like arguing about it.

They walked together toward the town. The sun was hot now, beating down un-

mercifully. James turned into an alleyway between the Bird Cage and a harness shop and went back along the wall. He halted for a moment before a closed door, and James had a look on his face. It reminded Coe of a man he'd faced once, a man who knew he wasn't as fast with a gun as Coe.

James stepped hesitantly to the door and knocked, timidly it seemed to Coe. A hoarse voice said, "Yeah. So you finally got here? Well, come on in, you mucklehead!"

James pushed the door open. "Hello, Arnie." His voice was ingratiating as he waved a fat hand to a bald man with a bleak face who sat behind a big desk. "Just as fast as I could." His voice was quaking.

The bald man stood up quickly and his hand went out, pointing at Coe. "Who's that?"

Coe had a look at the man's eyes, and he knew why James was scared. There was a snaky quality about the man James called Arnie. His face was thin and bony, and his eyes were black and unwinking.

James' whine was an attempt at placation. "Good god, Arnie, I wouldn't be here now except fer him. He gimme a hand."

"Well?"

"Hell, I don't even know yore name," James turned to Coe. "But this here's Arnie True."

"My name is Coe. Bud Coe." He watched True's eyes flicker and wondered what it meant, if anything.

Arnie True said nothing. Then he asked, "How many you get here?" His fingers played an impatient tattoo on the desk top.

"Many's I could," James said sulkily. "Forty head."

While Coe was wondering why James didn't mention the incident on the trail, there were light steps before a door to his left, and then someone tapped. The door swung open and a tall girl came in. She stopped just inside the door, hesitating. She had a direct look that wasn't bold at all, Coe thought. Her dark and wavy hair was

upswept, and her plain, dark clothes had a hard time hiding her soft figure.

Coe found her dark eyes on him, and there was disapproval in them at his stare. He moved his feet.

"I didn't know you was busy," she told True. "Jason Andrews wants to see you, and he said he was in a hurry."

Her voice was throaty, husky and caused Coe to thrill strangely. He saw no rings on her fingers. Her ankles peeping from the long dark dress were shapely.

True looked at Coe and then back at the girl. "Wait here," he said. He went to still another door and opened it and motioned James in with his head. The door closed on them and Coe was alone with the girl.

She walked to the desk and straightened a few papers. She didn't look at him.

Coe said, "You work for Mr. True?"

She didn't look at him, but she said, "Yes, I do."

"You like working here?"

Her hands stopped, and she stood very still for a moment. There was a troubled look on her smooth brown face. She said, "Yes, very much."

Voices came to them from the other side of the wall. True was shouting, but Coe couldn't make out what he was saying. He looked at the girl. She was pale, and he saw that her hands trembled.

He said, "Say, Miss—Miss—"

"Rainey," she said. "Jean Rainey."

"Mine's Coe. Bud Coe." He thought her name fitted her. "Say, Miss Rainey, is Jason Andrews a horse trader?"

She nodded. "I think so."

"Do you know anyone named Kirby Lander?" he asked her, watching her face closely.

The door flew open, and James came in, followed closely by True. James didn't stop but kept right on for the door, his face white and sweat standing out on his forehead. "Come on, Coe," he said.

In an eating place down the street, a

Mexican woman took their order and brought them black coffee while they waited for their food to cook.

"You don't connect with this man o' yours," James said between mouthfuls, "mebbe I can help you out."

"Who you want killed?" asked Coe.

There was a hurt look on the fat man's face. Then he chuckled. "You're funnin'," he said. "I got a little job that needs doin'. Maybe you'd like it anyway."

Coe shook his head. "Just that horse and a hundred dollars," he said.

"That's easy," chuckled James. He counted out five twenty-dollar gold-pieces and put them on the counter.

Coe drained his coffee and stood up and watched James pay for their breakfast.

Walking back to the corral, Coe asked, "Who's the tall girl in True's office?"

James chuckled knowingly and looked at Coe. "She's a looker, huh? Funny thing about that gal. She does some book work for Arnie."

"What's funny about her?" Coe wanted to know; he disliked James more all the time.

James emitted the chuckle Coe was beginning to hate. "Arnie brought her out here fur an entertainer in the Bird Cage. Guess she thought it was opery 'er some'-pin 'til she got here. She didn't like it. Quit in 'bout a week. Boy's 'uz crazy 'bout her, too. An' she quit."

"She workin' now to get money enough to leave on," Coe conjectured aloud. "Guess she's kind o' proud."

"That's about it," James said. He sighed, "Man, she's some gal."

Coe felt like hitting him.

They turned into the corral, and Coe got his saddle from the wagon. James brought out a fair-looking horse, a short-coupled bay, as compact as a balled fist.

"This'n do?" asked James, his small black eyes leering at Coe.

Coe nodded. "The Army wouldn't take him, but he'll do for me," he said.

The smile left James' face. "What's wrong with him?"

Coe laid his hand on the bay's hip. "Capped hip," he said. "Must of fell when he's a colt. But that wouldn't keep him off my string."

James voice was admiring. "Man, you know hosses."

Coe saddled the bay and stepped in the saddle. He looked down at James. "Thanks for nothin'," he said and touched the bay with his heels.

"You don't get what you're after," James called, "drop by and see me. I got a deal fur you."

Coe didn't answer and he didn't look back.

HE FOUND out at the blacksmith shop he'd have to retrace part of his tracks of the night before to reach the Rafter H. He went along the road, thinking of Jess Hamilton, a big squinting-eyed, red-headed man with a slow smile and a streak of luck for which he himself was partly responsible. Scouting for Crooks, Coe had run into Hamilton in the mountains. Jess had made a fair stake, a sack of dust and nuggets, and was surrounded by Apaches. Coe remembered the fight with something akin to pleasure. For several months after that he and Jess Hamilton had worked together. Coe and Hamilton had become a by-word in the hard-bitten old General's camp. They'd had some experiences that pulled them together. Coe knew Hamilton would gladly help him out. That was the nature of the man.

The Rafter H was an imposing spread. Coe came through the big gate, a mile from the ranch buildings which squatted in a cluster of trees. A wrought-iron H under a rafter was in the arch above the gate. Fat steers grazed along the wagon road. As he neared the ranch, a big hound come out baying, and the cook showed briefly in the door of the cookshack.

Coe tried the office first, and, when he'd

knocked a second time, the cook came outside his shack and called, "Ain't nobody home but me."

Coe rode over and stopped. He said, "Howdy. I'm lookin' for Jess Hamilton."

The cook shook his gray head. "You're 'bout a year late," he told Coe.

Coe's heart began hammering. He'd dreaded such a possibility but he hadn't permitted himself to think about it.

"I'm a friend of Jess's," he said. "We scouted for Crooks a few years back."

The cook scratched his graying chin whiskers thoughtfully. "Jess's great feller," he said. "Been gone a year. Sold out and went to Californu. Boss'll be back t'night. He knows where Jess is."

Coe turned the bay, hiding his disappointment. "Guess I won't wait," he said. "Thanks."

"Better light and have a snack," said the cook, and Coe could read longing in his voice, longing for someone to talk to. "Long ride back on an empty belly."

"No, but thanks just same," Coe said. "I'll be movin'."

He wondered what his next move would be, now that Jess Hamilton was out of it. He automatically thought of Leo James, wondering what kind of job James might have for him. Nothing honest, he told himself; but he knew he'd look the man up. There just didn't seem to be anything else to do right at this moment.

He avoided Muleshoe that afternoon, circling the town and came to the river. He turned the bay down river toward James' corral. He cut around a sandbar and stopped the bay. Another horse stood in a clump of willow, just ahead. Below, close to the muddy water, Jean Rainey sat, in the shade of scrawny trees. She was staring out across the wide, sand-colored water, and she hadn't heard him. He sat his horse for a moment, watching her still face, wondering what it was about her that appealed to him and set him to thinking thoughts that were new. He decided maybe

it was the direct, honest look she had. She managed that without seeming bold. His horse put its head down and snorted, and she looked around quickly and then stood up.

He took off his hat before he stepped down. "Didn't mean to scare you," he said. He wrapped the leathers around a bush and slid down the sloping bank to the white sand of the bar. A hot wind fanned up the river and moved little tendrils of her dark hair over her forehead. He took a lot of pleasure in looking at her.

"You didn't," she said. A guarded look came over her face and puzzled him.

He built a smoke, looking at her and liking what he saw.

"James told me you're a singer," he said. "I'd like to hear you sometime."

She smiled faintly and he couldn't tell whether it was a cynical smile or not. "I did sing," she said. "But out here there was—there are other things—"

He knew what the other things were. He had a flash of admiration for her. She didn't make excuses for her predicament of being stranded in a raw and rough Western desert town.

"I s'pose you'll be leavin' here soon's you can," he said.

She looked at him in surprise. "How'd you know?"

He moved his shoulders. "I'd know, even if James hadn't told me."

"You're a friend of Mr. James?"

He shook his head. "I've known him two days," he said. "Two days too many."

She smiled then, a friendly smile that changed the sadness that was part of her. "You don't look like the kind he calls his friends," she said.

Coe laughed at that, remembering it was his first laugh in quite a long while. They sat in silence for a long moment, looking out across the river. There was a strange feeling in Coe, a feeling that was as new to him as when he rode his first horse or fired his first gun.

"I got a little ranch up around Flagstaff," he said. "Sure is different from all this sand and heat."

"Why, that's not so very far away," she said, wonderingly.

He grinned. "But it's up high," he said. "Up in the mountains you get a cool wind sometimes. There's timber and water. Down here it's different. Even the people are different."

"Then what're you doing here?" she asked.

He told her and she listened carefully. She was silent for a long time after he finished speaking. Then she said, "You must be very careful." She rose and turned toward her horse. She mounted and sat there looking at him. He went to his own horse and looked up at her. She looked as though she wanted to tell him something.

"You know what James wants me to do?"

She shook her head negatively. "No. But he and Mr. True quarrel all the time. They got along all right at one time. But now he's afraid of him." She pulled her mount around, and over her shoulder she said, "Please be careful."

He considered that while he finished his smoke, watching her ride away. He liked the way she admonished him to be careful. He'd never given special attention to being careful before. Her minute concern gave him a strange exultation. He hadn't felt so good since he began planning the horse ranch. The thought of the ranch was sobering, though.

James didn't act surprised. He sat in the shade of the hay rick, supine with the heat. He held a straw between his teeth and he said, "Didn't connect with your friend, hey?"

Coe loosened his cinches and stroked the bay's legs. "Wouldn't be here if I had and you know it," he said shortly.

"Then you want t' take on my deal?" he asked lazily, almost insolently.

"I'll listen to it," Coe said grudgingly.

He resisted an inner urge to climb on the bay and go back to Flagstaff. And then what? another voice asked. Go back to a horseless horse ranch? And tell Dub Sheridan, the banker, you haven't any money to pay your note? Sure, Coe, there's a handful of beans and a sack of flour in your shack; that'll hold you for a couple of weeks. After that, you can trust to luck. His lips curled slightly at the thought of his luck.

"This here is a kind of deal I wouldn't even talk about," James said, "if I didn't think you'd go along."

"There's some things I wouldn't do," Coe said.

"You've killed a man?" James asked. His voice was quiet and had a deadly tone to it.

"So that's it," Coe thought. He shook his head. "In self defense," he said softly. "More than once. Never for money, or for the pure hell of it."

James spat the straw from his mouth. "You ain't countin' 'Paches?" His voice was still deadly, and he didn't sound like the man Coe knew on the road to Muleshoe. "Arnie True, he's part 'Pache, Coe."

"So?" Coe's heart began to hammer. This Leo James wasn't the soft fat coyote he pretended to be. Coe remembered Maria's warning and Jean Rainey's admonition to be careful, and he felt a chill on his backbone.

"You notice Arnie's eyes, Coe? It wouldn't make no difference to Arnie if he killed you or not. You get in his way, he'd kill you."

Coe was surprised at James' discernment.

"I'm not in his way," Coe said, "and I ain't never hired to kill and I wouldn't."

James got to his feet. "I'm satisfied," he said. "Now that's what I wanted t' know. You and me can do business."

Coe brought out his tobacco sack, thinking about this. He waited for James to go on.

"I just wanted to make sure you wouldn't put a bullet in Arnie," James said. "After

all, him and me're in business, and I wouldn't want him out o' th' way. He's real smart, Arnie is."

"I think he is," Coe agreed.

"Now here's what I want. There's a pasteboard box in Arnie's desk. It belongs to me, sure 'nuff. It's 'bout eighteen inches long and six inches wide and, say mebbe eight inches deep. It's all tied with a piece of grass rope. You get it fur me, and I'll pay you."

"You'll pay me what?" Coe asked. He had his cigaret made now, and he lighted it with fingers that didn't show his inner emotions.

"Well, you lost seventy head to Lander," said James. "At a hundred a head that'd be seven thousand. I'll give you half that. Thirty-five hundred for that box in Arnie's desk what belongs to me anyway."

"Seventy-five head," said Coe, his eyes suddenly cold and expressionless.

"Yeah, but five—well, how about it?" James moved uneasily and sudden beads of heavy perspiration appeared on his face. "You want it or dontcha?"

"Sure, I'll take it," Coe said. He dropped his cigaret on the hard-baked ground and stepped on it. "Any certain time, or anything?"

James sighed deeply. "Ten o'clock to-night. I'll be talking to Arnie up front and keep him busy. Go down the alley at ten sharp. Right through the door the way you and me went. Get it out'n his desk and come back here. I'll pay you cash, and you can make tracks out of here."

CHAPTER

3

The Dirty Trick

Coe had to leave quick so as not to betray his excitement. He knew he hadn't told James how many head of horses he'd lost. It was true that he had seventy-five head, but five of those horses wouldn't be acceptable to Army purchasing agents.

He turned his bay over to the liveryman and talked with the man for ten minutes. Then he went on down the board walk to the general merchandise store where he bought a shirt, pants, underwear, and socks. He went from there to a barbershop across the street run by a friendly young Mexican. He had a steaming hot bath, while he listened to the idle chatter of the barber on the other side of the partition. The herbs Maria had put on his furrowed side had dried out. He removed the bits of dried leaves, roots, and bark, and his side looked clean; it didn't pain him.

He dressed in his new clothes and moved out to the chair where he had his long and shaggy brown hair trimmed and a shave. He felt good as he went into the hotel and rented a room. He signed the soiled register and noticed that Jason Andrews was the last signature before his own.

He got the key to his room and put away his dirty clothes. He noticed that Jason Andrews' room was next to his own, but there was no light in the room.

He went out on the street and found the place he'd had breakfast. He ate steak and potatoes and when he cleaned his plate it was dark. He smoked one cigaret, and, when it was short enough to scorch his lips, he went out on the street and strolled through the soft dusk to the hotel. Jean Rainey was coming out of the hotel dining room when he went in the lobby. He lifted his hat and she smiled at him.

"I'd like to ask you something," he said.

She looked around the lobby. A derby-hatted drummer was looking at a week-old paper. The clerk nodded, half-asleep on his high stool behind the counter. She considered him for a moment with her level eyes and then nodded.

He held the door open for her and they went down the street toward the river. At the end of the wooden walk they stopped. From behind them came the sound of a piano and off to their right, a dog howled. The stars seemed bright and low.

"I'm leavin' right soon," he said. "I'm goin' back to the ranch I told you about. What that ranch needs more than anything is somebody like you."

She was silent and he peered through the darkness. Her shoulders were shaking. She was laughing at him. He felt sick.

"You can laugh if you want to," he said roughly. "I thought you wanted to get away from here. An' I wanted you to go with me—"

"You fool," she whispered, "I'm not laughing."

He touched her shoulder and then his fingers went up to her face and felt the wet dampness of her cheeks. "I didn't mean to make you bawl," he said humbly.

She gave a little laugh. "You didn't," she said. "You've made me very happy. First time I've been happy since I left the East."

"Then you'll go with me?" he asked eagerly, boyishly. "I've got another—"

She put her hand on his arm and reached up and kissed him lightly on his cheek. "I can't, Bud," she said gently. "I can't do it."

"All right," he said after he thought about that for awhile. "Want to tell me why?"

"There's the Bird Cage," she said, trying to make her voice cheerful. "That's the biggest reason, I guess. I worked there, remember?"

"That don't make no never-mind," he said levelly. "You think on it. If you want to go you be at the livery stable at ten-thirty, ready to travel."

"I'd like to," her voice was low, "but I can't play a dirty trick like that on you. I like you too much."

"I'm a man who knows what he wants," he said simply.

She said, "No," low-voiced, and then said, "I'm going back to the hotel."

His heart was heavy. He said, "One other thing. The back of the Bird Cage. Arnie's office. There's two doors besides

the one in the alley. Where do they go?"

She was close to him, so close he smelled the faint perfume of her hair. She looked up at him in the darkness and without hesitation said, "The door on the front side goes into my office. Next to my office is a private card room, then the stage and beyond that the big cardroom and bar. The door opposite the alley goes into a store-room. They keep whisky and the big iron safe in there."

"Thanks," he said. "Thanks a heap, Jean." He left her standing there in the darkness.

He went back to the hotel. The wall clock said it was ten minutes after nine when he crossed the lobby and went down the dim hallway. He tip-toed along the wall, past his own room and stopped at number 6. Light came from a narrow slit under the door, and he heard footsteps move inside and then stop.

He gripped the knob and turned it slowly and pushed easy. The door was unlocked. He pushed it all the way open and went inside and closed it again. The heavy-shouldered man turned to stare. He was stripped to the waist, and he was washing in a big white porcelain bowl. His gun belt hung on a brass knob of the bedstead. The man froze, his mouth open, his breath coming in little gasps that were plainly audible to Coe.

Coe said, "Hello, Kirby," in a quiet voice. "Where's my money and my horses?"

Kirby Lander looked at the gun on the bedstead with longing eyes. He looked back at Coe and smiled. "You ain't got a thing to worry about, Bud," he said smoothly. He hung up the towel and his hand dropped to the water pitcher. He flung it and dove for Coe.

Coe stepped aside, and the water pitcher crashed against the wall and shattered, the pieces flying around the room. Coe brought his boot up and met Kirby's dive. The sound of leather against flesh was not

pleasant. Kirby thudded against the wall. He got to his hands and knees, his head hanging, blood dripping to the floor. He shook his head.

Rage shook Coe, and he stepped forward and grabbed a handful of Kirby's black hair. He lifted the bigger man to his feet and drove a hard fist into Kirby's handsome face. Kirby whined. Coe slapped him several times, his palm sounding like the crack of a pistol.

"Where's my money and horses?" asked Coe in a voice that was terrible because it was so cold and even.

"Let me go, Bud," Kirby gasped through bloody lips. "Let me go an' I'll tell ya!"

Coe gave him a shove, and Kirby lunged toward the bedstead. He got his hands on his gun before Coe reached him. He whipped around with the gun in both hands and jerked the trigger. The gun went off in the air as Coe slugged Kirby again. He knocked Kirby over the bedstead onto the bed and jumped after him. They rolled off and hit the floor with a crash that shook the building.

SOMEONE banged on the door and yelled for them to open up.

Kirby was trying to jab his thumbs in Coe's eyes. Coe eased his head around and bit down viciously, tasting blood as Kirby screamed. Coe hammered Kirby's head with his hard fists until Kirby went limp.

A steady thumping went on against the door.

Coe staggered to his feet, his shirt bloody and torn. He turned as the door burst open. A big man plunged in; a big man with a sandy mustache and a gun in his hand. The frightened face of the hotel clerk peered over the big man's shoulder.

Coe saw the star pinned to the big man's vest. He grinned drunkenly. "Glad you showed up, Sheriff," he said. "Guess I'd killed him if you hadn't."

Kirby Lander stirred on the floor, and Coe stepped over and pulled him up and set

him on the edge of the bed. "Want to tell me where my horses are, Kirby?" he asked gently, while the sheriff looked on in amazement.

"Up—up river," Kirby gasped. "'Bout four miles. Two my men holdin' 'em there."

"And the money?" Coe's voice was hard and implacable.

Kirby put his hands around his middle, his head sagging. "In my money belt," he mumbled. He slumped back on the bed, his face battered and bloody.

"You hear him, Sheriff?" Coe asked. "He stole my horses and money. He was supposed to be my partner." He stepped to Kirby and pulled him upright again.

The sheriff moved over and put the muzzle of his pistol against Coe's shoulder. He said gruffly. "He's had enough, even fer a hoss thief."

Coe shook his head. "I'm through with him except for talk," he said. "I want my money and a little talk." He stripped the money belt from Kirby's waist. He shook out the gold coins on the bed and counted it. He looked at the sheriff. "This is all mine," he said. "You want to hold it 'til this is cleared up?"

"Let's not go so fast," the sheriff said.

"You heard him," said Coe. "You heard what he said about my horse herd. You gonna send men up there to pick them horses up? And the men who're holdin' 'em?"

The sheriff got the story fast. He nodded. "I'll send a few o' the boys right out," he promised. "You gotta be round here to clear this up," he added.

Coe was using the water Kirby had, to wash the blood off his face. He said, "Sure, I'll be back." He talked to the sheriff as he washed, and the sheriff nodded, smiling at times.

Coe pushed through the knot of people outside the door and went out into the lobby. The clock on the wall said ten o'clock. He slipped out the door and turned down the street toward the Bird Cage. He

went past and turned into the alley. He loosened his gun in his holster and palmed Arnie True's door open.

The room was empty. A single light on a wall-bracket reflector lighted the room dimly. With his gun in his hand, he walked warily to the desk and yanked open a drawer. There was a box in the drawer tied with grass rope. He untied the rope with his teeth and tipped the box so the lid fell off. The box held a pair of boots.

He threw the box on the desk and went across the room and opened the door to the storeroom. The light from True's office fell across a body huddled before a big iron safe. A knife handle protruded from Arnie True's back. His hands were doubled behind him as though he'd tried to pull the knife out.

Coe stiffened and raised his gun at the sudden rush of feet in Jean's office. He stepped back into Arnie's office and closed the door. The door across from him flew open and Jean Rainey came into the room. Her face was pale and frightened. She came across to him and took him by the arm, shaking him lightly.

"Get out of here, quick," she whispered. "He's trying to frame you. James is trying to blame something on you. I heard. The sheriff will be here any moment!"

He grinned and said, "There's a little time left."

She tried to push him toward the door. "Don't stand there, Bud," she cried softly. "Please, Bud, please hurry. I'll—I'll go with you Bud. I want to, but I couldn't before. I will now. If you'll hurry!"

He took her by the arm and said, "You mean it, Jean?"

She nodded, "But hurry, hurry Bud. You haven't a moment to lose."

He straightened. "That door leads outside?" He nodded toward the storeroom.

She said, "Yes."

He pulled her after him, crossed the room, and slapped the door open. He went inside, keeping between Arnie True's body

and the girl. They went across the room, and Coe took down the heavy bar and stood it beside the door. They went outside and circled the next building and came into the livery stable from the back door.

Two horses were saddled and waiting. Coe stuck his head out the door and said, "We're ready, mister."

The liveryman got up from his chair beside the stable door and came in. Coe paid him and helped Jean up into the saddle.

"Your clothes?" he said, "what about your clothes?"

She shook her head. "There isn't anything here I want to take with me," she said.

The sheriff came out of the shadows, and Jean moaned.

The sheriff said, "Leo looked me up—just like you said. I got him."

"Ah," sighed Coe, "it's worse than I thought, Sheriff. I thought it was a simple frame so he or a deputy could kill me. But Arnie's in his storeroom—with a knife in his back."

"When James and Lander saw each

other, they both started talking," the sheriff said. "Seems Lander was about to replace James as Arnie's right hand. James wasn't standin' still for that. He figured to do away with True and lay it on you. Almost did it too, man." He stepped forward and laid a canvas money belt across Coe's saddle. "Won't need to hold this," he said briefly. He stepped back and said, "Wait a minute now. You want, I'll handle those horses for you. Army wants 'em bad. One twenty-five apiece. I'll send you the full amount less ten per cent. All right?"

"All right," Coe said and looked at the girl. "You ready?"

Her eyes were full of laughter. "You tricked me," she said.

They started their horses. On the edge of town, Coe stopped. "Last chance," he said. "You still want to go?"

She leaned toward him and put both her arms around his neck. She pulled his head down.

He found her lips warm and alive.

She pulled away. "Yes," she said. ● ● ●

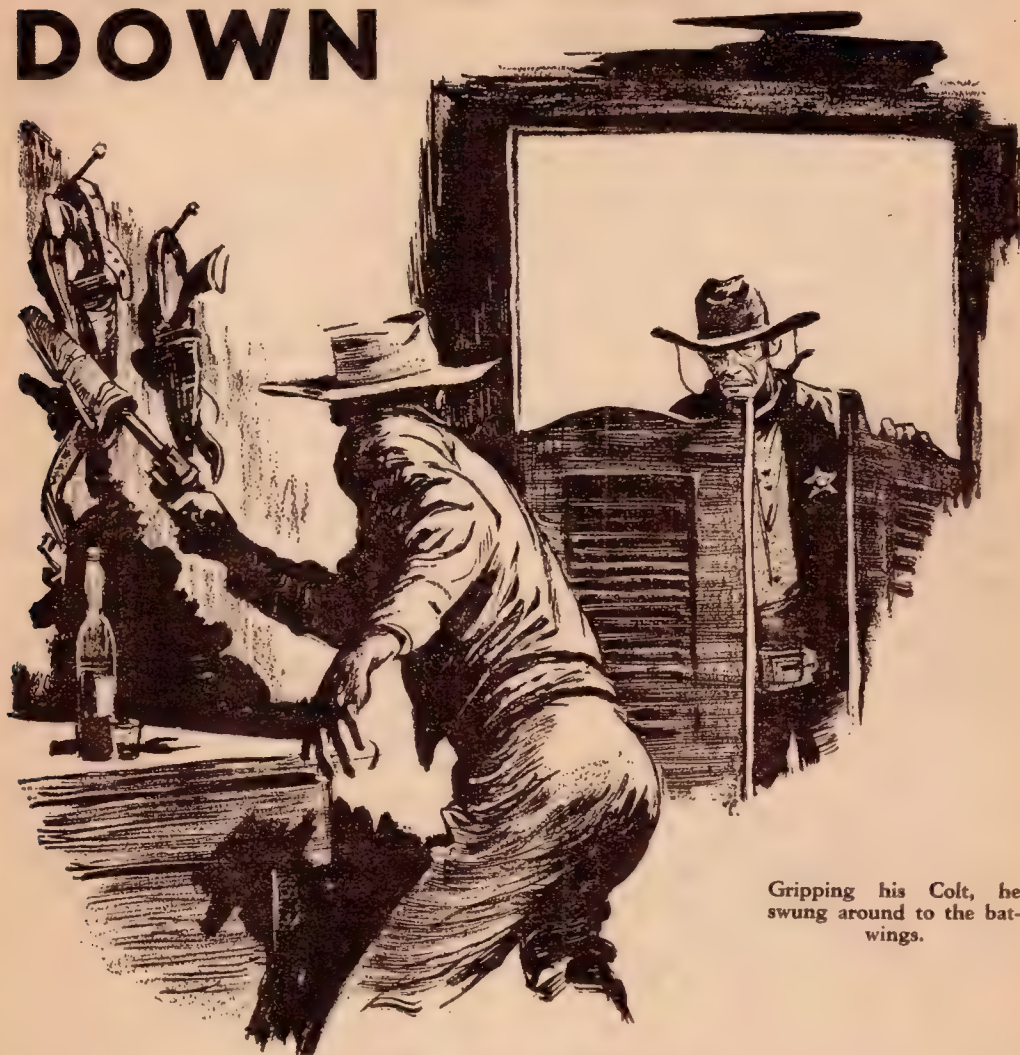
Listed below (jumbled fashion) are 10 "men and women of the West"—good or bad—who are much better remembered by their nicknames and/or aliases than by their real names—either "first," "last," or both. See if you can supply at least 7 of them with their bonafide monickers for a passing score; 8-9 is good; 10 excellent.

- | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. JAMES | (a) "Pat" Garrett |
| 2. WILLIAM | (b) "Cattle Kate" Watson |
| 3. CHRISTOPHER | (c) "Butch" Cassidy |
| 4. FRANCISCO | (d) "Wild Bill" Hickok |
| 5. FRANK | (e) "Calamity Jane" Burke |
| 6. FLOYD | (f) "Buffalo Bill" Cody |
| 7. THOMAS | (g) "Buckskin" Leslie |
| 8. ELLA | (h) "Poncho" Villa |
| 9. MARTHA | (i) "Cole" Younger |
| 10. GEORGE LEROY PARKER | (j) "Kit" Carson |

ANSWERS

1-d, 2-f, 3-j, 4-h, 5-g, 6-a, 7-i, 8-b, 9-e, 10-c.

RIDE THE MAN DOWN



Gripping his Colt, he swung around to the batwings.

By **ED LAVANWAY**

*There was a bill to pay at Dry
Gorge toll-bridge—a bill Clint
Durling would pay only in blood!*

THE valley, shaped like a bowl, was shaded with scattered growths of live oak trees. For the last couple of hours—since daylight—Durling had seen several hundred head of Slash B branded cattle grazing, and he had noticed two line-riding cowhands keeping them choused away from the road, throwing them to the

right of it. The land to the left of the road had been taken up by nesters—which fact spelled trouble in boxcar letters to Durling, but it was no trouble of his.

The road was a local one. Durling had angled onto it after coming over the mountain, now well behind him, as he had approached the first sodbuster's layout three miles back. The man, scrawny and suspicious, appeared in his doorway in his underwear and overalls, gave Durling curt permission to draw water from his well, and stepped back to keep out of sight until Durling had drunk, watered his roan gelding, replenished his canteen, and started on.

This led Durling to believe that the Slash B outfit had opened the season on nesters, and he wondered what he would encounter farther on; at the same time he vowed he would mind his own business regardless of his sympathies, deeming this the way to stay healthy, to enjoy a long life, and, perchance, to prosper eventually.

The hoemen had felled a big oak beside the road, sawn it into bolts, and split most of the bolts into stovewood that gleamed brightly in a high pile. Thin smoke plumes rose against the mountain background on the left, as though men burned slash in clearing the land to put it to the plow; but the smoke was old, yesterday's; no live sparks or partly consumed leaves ascended with it; nor did axes or saws resound there now.

Durling rode another quarter-mile and approached a shady oak, a hundred yards off the road, where a dozen men were gathered, hunkered or standing in a rough circle, overall-clad, armed with six-shooters and rifles or shotguns. Two wagons and teams were parked there, and seven saddled farm horses were tethered near-by. Durling looked straight ahead.

His appearance, however—he was a lean-built man who wore a big side rolled white hat with his other range garb, sat a

single-cinch saddle, whose catch-rope and bedroll were tied to pommel and behind cantle—seemed to create a disturbance among the nesters. A hatless, red-haired man called, "Hey! Are you a Bascom man?"

"No. I'm a Durling man."

"Durling?"

"Old John Durling's boy, Clint—I'm his man."

The redheaded nester said, "Ah, hell, he's just riding through," and turned back to continue his parley with his neighbors. Durling rode on, passing a road running off to the right presently and seeing in the mouth of a canyon in the far distance the headquarters buildings of a ranch. He thought, It's a damned shame, all right, but I can't do anything about it. He had worries of his own.

He was now approaching another sodbuster layout: new box house, new barn and sheds, recently fenced corrals. The front yard wasn't fenced. It was barren of grass and trees, too; neat flower beds bespoke the touch of a beauty-loving woman, though, so Durling kept looking as he came on.

He saw chickens moving about, pecking here and there, and then he noticed a moulty old white hen jump upon the end of the porch nearest to him and stalk along with neck stretched, toes flexing, head bobbing and eyes blinking until she came even with the open door. Here she paused, peering into the house. A red-headed girl, skirts lifted, rushed out, kicking at her, and saying, "Nasty old thing! I'm going to kill you if you don't stay off my clean porch." The hen took to the air over the steps in a flurry of beating wings, lost feathers, and squawks that upset the rooster in the barn lot; and fled, when she hit the ground, under the house.

The red-haired girl, seeing Durling, who had reined his roan over to stop near the yard, now stood, quite composed, to look him over.

She herself, woman-size around bust and hips, had a lovely complexion, long lashes and nice eyes, with which she met Durling's gaze steadily; he touched his hat-brim, saying, "I see wire cables yonder. Looks like a hanging bridge. That a river or something?"

The redhead folded her left knuckles against her side, and told him severely, "Ask Frank Bascom."

"I don't know him."

"You don't know me either, do you?"

"No, but I'd rather talk with you than with him."

"Not if you're looking for work. Your kind of work."

Durling flushed, saying, "I'm not looking for work. But what's wrong with my kind of work? You like beefsteak, don't you?"

"Not enough you can tell it."

"I know—you eat hog meat. Was you cooking for me, you'd learn to eat beef."

"Or horse meat. But I'm not—" The girl jerked around quickly to say, "What?" respectfully to someone inside the house; then she too went in, but first she told Durling, "It's Big Dry Gorge, and I hope you fall in it."

Durling, still flushing, rode on.

GORGE, canyon, river, creek, or whatever—it wasn't going to trouble him; so long as it was bridged with something that would support a wagon and team, it would hold up a cow. Durling would drive his herd across one by one, when they got here, if he had to.

Durling had come—over a range of black chaparral-covered hills, across a cactus desert, through two isolated settlements, and over a sagebrush rangeland that was already overstocked—from a basin where cattle lay dead in sandy river beds and dried-up waterholes, where the grass crushed to powder under the hoofs of a horse, and where the other ranchers were laying off their rope and branding-iron

men to employ those with skinning knives.

Durling was breaking trail for his foreman.

He had encountered plenty of tough going but nothing so far that would stop his foreman. A herd would get thirsty over some of it, but Durling's cows were already accustomed to scanty drinking. All they had to do was to keep themselves alive, didn't have to be fat; he wasn't bringing them to market. There was no market, anyway, this side of the Rockies, had he wanted to sell. He was trying to hang onto as much of his she-stuff as he could, and he had kept around a thousand head in fairly good shape with one small spring; even this waterhole would have failed him in another thirty days, though.

Durling rode under thick trees and down a fifty-foot slope to reach the bridge, observing hoofprints but no wagon wheel tracks coming off it, although the structure was substantial, strong enough to support Durling's herd all at once, were there room. This was a toll bridge with a gate and small shack at yonder end, Durling noticed.

The gorge, with sheer walls, was no more than sixty feet wide but fully a hundred deep; cleft here by some ancient shifting of these mountains, it ran from one precipice to another and entirely cut off yonder bench and town from the valley; but it wasn't bone-dry; Durling saw a sheet of water or quicksand.

The steel-shod hoofs of his roan rattled the two-by's of the bridge deck and spilled dust through the cracks into the gorge. At the heavy gate, the gelding stopped of its own volition, and Durling spoke to the two men who had watched him intently from the moment he showed.

They were town-raised men, accustomed to dealing with the public, and wore their second-best store suits. The heavy-set man came to the gate. The younger man, still dark-haired, stood in the doorway, Winchester cradled under his arm, his coat

pushed back from a butt-first holstered six-shooter. Durling saw no badge on this man, but the fellow had the mien of a lawman—one who expected trouble to break out at any moment, and who kept gazing across the gorge after he spoke to Durling. The older man bent to fumble with the padlock and chain; Durling, dismounting, said, "You keep it locked."

"Bascom's idea," the man said, and straightened to back away and pull the gate open.

Durling led his horse through and ground-hitched him near the shack. He asked how much he owed, and was told two bits. He paid it, saying: "That's mighty little. How come?"

The man said, "Bascom," and turned back to shut the gate.

Durling followed him, saying, "Bascom own this bridge?"

"Belongs to the town."

Durling said, "Yeah? How much for a wagon and team?"

"Ten dollars."

"But I'm a cowman, so I pay two bits."

"Everybody a-horseback pays two bits. You want to pay more?"

"No. I was just thinking. How much for a cow?"

"Damn it, I don't know, young fellow. Don't many—"

The man with the Winchester said, "Ten cents a head for cattle."

"That suits me," Durling said.

The man with the Winchester said, "Where are you from, mister?"

"Peralta Basin," Durling said, and explained: he was hitting his only practicable railroad at its closest point, Bigtimber, where he would write his foreman concerning the trail and whence in two weeks or so they would ship over this shortest and cheapest route to Montana, and a fresh ranching start.

The man with the Winchester said, "Bascom mentioned something the other day about that drouth." He looked across the

gorge then, and asked, "Run into any trouble over yonder?"

Durling told about the parley.

"The red-haired man is Sam Woodruff. Egging them on, was he? Sam thinks he's an organizer. He says the hoemen will burn this bridge if they don't get some say-so in the management. Bascom says they haven't got the guts. He won't give me no men here, either. Fact is, Bascom don't give a damn if they do tally me. I'm just a big hunk of meat on a wolf trap."

Durling said, "That's bad."

THE middle-aged man sat down against the shack wall, whittling on a stick. He said, "Bascom stubbed his toe when he had this bridge built. He used to make a fifty-mile drive up around the mountain yonder to get to town. Then he hit on the idea of having Bigtimber vote money for this bridge. But before him or any one of his men set foot or hoof on it, damned if a nester didn't hightail it across with a house-keeping outfit. Bascom didn't know then what he does now, though, or the nester wouldn't have made it."

Durling said, "I'll bet he wouldn't." He gathered up his reins and mounted. He sat a moment, watching the older man whittle, and then he said, "I guess that first place is Woodruff's. I saw a red-headed girl there."

"Don't you bother your head none about Tessie Woodruff, young fellow. She's not your kind of a girl. Too worldly. All she thinks about is having a high-heeled time. Dances and parties. She tried to coax that gal of mine over to one last week, but I put my foot down on that! You stop there?"

Durling shook his head. He watched the man a moment longer, and then he turned his roan away, saying, "I'll see you. I've got to find out about my cars and get me a place to hang my hat for a while."

The man with the Winchester said, "There's a law against sixguns."

Durling said, "That kind of a town—thanks," and rode on up the slope.

He had noticed that the railroad, maintaining grade percentage through this mountain range, emerged from a tunnel northeast of the town, curved around the peak, and disappeared into another bore on the northwest.

The town itself, started as a hardrock mining camp, was a single line of buildings thrown up, not along this bridge road, but along one that followed the right of way, that climbed into a northwest pass when the railroad went into the smoke-blackened masonry tunnel. Durling was seeing the back side of the town and the back-door refuse that had spilled all down the slope and into the gorge.

Two cowhands, young and light-haired, both on black horses, both armed only with rifle in saddle boot, turned off the main thoroughfare as Durling reached it, and the round-faced man said, "Say, fellow, you want a job?"

"No, I guess not."

"Yeah. Well, I'm Wade Reynolds, foreman of the Slash B, and we're so short-handed, I wasn't going to pass up a chance to hire a good man. Sorry I stopped you."

The thinner rannihan said persuasively, "Wade's a fine fellow to work for."

"I'm just going to be here a short while, looking after a little business of my own."

Wade Reynolds said, "Yeah. Well . . ." He looked at Durling's middle, telling him, "Man, don't wear that sixgun around town. Sure get you in trouble."

"So I heard," Durling said, and he turned in among the dray and ore wagons and other rigs that filled Bigtimber's main street. It was a noisy town, with busy blacksmith shops both ways from this intersection, with hoisting machinery and stampmills on the mountainside, and with a sawmill in the timber beyond the cattle pens somewhere behind Durling, who now stopped his roan in front of the Gold Peak Saloon.

The town government had installed the sidewalk, a wide plank one which left some of the false-fronted buildings sitting too far back. The newer structures had all been located so that their awnings projected over it. Durling saw quite a few people about, both men and women. There weren't many on horseback, and few horses were tethered at the hitch-rails. This was the third building from the corner, the first saloon Durling had come to, and when he stepped upon the sidewalk, a big-bodied man with light hair and light blue eyes under a low-crowned gray hat came out of the next building, a barbershop, saying, "Hang up that gun!"

This well-dressed man wore a marshal's badge, but he spoke so roughly, with bystanders listening, that Durling said, "I aim to. But damned if I'm going to be spoken to like that."

The marshal said, "A Southerner."

Durling lifted and replaced his hat, feeling increased heat around his eyes; but the marshal said, "All right—excuse me, since you're a cowhand and intending to drink Gold Peak whisky," and a murmur ran through the onlookers.

Durling turned away, to push through the swinging doors. Not joining those at the gambling layouts or those at the brass-railed mahogany bar, he turned toward the hundred or so numbered pegs covering the wall space between the fancy backbar and the plate glass window, which was wainscotted above eye-level with green paint. A score of gunbelts hung here, so Durling added his, taking a check from a white-coated bartender, and departing at once.

He went to the depot and discussed his car needs with the agent, wrote and mailed a letter to his foreman, rode out to inspect the cattle pens, and afterwards came from one end of town to the other, looking over the other saloons, the restaurants, mercantile establishments, and corrals.

He found only the one hotel, two-storied and clapboarded, which sat back among

trees away from the street and facing the depot. The prices were reasonable, however, and the lobby comfortably furnished. Frank Bascom owned it, the balding clerk said when Durling remarked upon it.

Durling ascended the stairs, found his room, and deposited his bedroll and carbine. He came back downstairs then to put up his horse, paying the roan's keep for two weeks. Now it was well past noon; Durling hadn't eaten since the cold snack from his saddlebags at daylight, so he headed for a restaurant, taking the front table in the center row, seating himself so he could look out through the screen door.

He saw a familiar face presently, that of the scrawny nester at whose place he had stopped early this morning, and in the same instant the cold-eyed marshal came into sight from the opposite direction.

The marshal and the nester, meeting, stopped to talk in tones so low that Durling paid it no mind until the big lawman brutally and unexpectedly drove his fist into the hoeman's stomach, wrenching from him a loud and catchy gasp. The marshal next hit the scrawny man with his gunbarrel, knocking him to his knees and leaving his face bloody. Durling thought, as the marshal strode on, I hate to see anything like that, but what could I do about it? The nester gained his feet and limped off, seeking medical aid. Durling paid for his meal and went outside, planning to loaf a while.

AN HOUR later he sat on the window-bench of the general store two doors west of the El Dorado Saloon, in front of which one of the housemen, flashy in broadcloth and white linen and gold jewelry, was talking with a dark-haired girl in a white lawn dress. The girl's features bore such unmistakable resemblance to those of the toll-gate keeper that Durling, recalling the man's forbidding his daughter to attend Tessie Woodruff's party, wondered what he would say to this.

It wasn't any of Durling's business,

though, so he put his gaze on the freight engine that was spotting a string of gondolas on one of the mine spurs.

An exclamation from the girl pulled his attention back presently; and he saw her start to walk off only to have the gambler catch her wrist and jerk her back so violently it swirled her skirts. The girl swung with her free hand, slapping the tinhorn but cried out herself when his bony fingers clamped down. The gambler released her, cast a furtive glance both ways along the sidewalk, and slid back into the saloon. The girl, wheeling away, came toward Durling, looking back, rubbing her wrist.

She slowed down, saying to Durling, "He hurt me."

Durling took off his hat and got up, since the girl had stopped. He said, "You knew he was there, didn't you?"

"I have to pass here."

"Why don't you complain to the marshal?"

The girl said, "That's who we were talking about. He wants me to work for him. Housekeeper. Here in town." She stood a moment, looking around at the half-dozen others who had witnessed her humiliation. She said, "Those men just . . ."

Durling reddened. He said, "That's what you church people get for making us take off our guns. That tinhorn had a six-shooter in a shoulder holster and a derringer up his sleeve. They generally do. Think a man wants his stomach full of lead?"

"Who made you take off your gun? Our minister? You're wrong if you think the church people have any say in this town."

"Then somebody ought to do something about it."

The girl said scornfully, "Who? You?"

"If I wanted to."

The girl said, "Oh, you talk like a Texan," and then she went on, walking swiftly.

Durling watched her, putting on his hat and taking out a cigar to chew on.

Durling had heard the air test, the high-ball blasts; the locomotive exhaust now

slammed against his ears with the banging of the couplings running back through the boxcars, flats and gondolas, and he thought, Wish my cows were rolling out on that train. He saw the girl go into a millinery store.

The Bascom machine suited Durling. The bridge toll on a thousand head of cattle was negligible under Basom, but the sodbusters would up it when they took over, which they would surely do if Durling butted in—probably to a dollar a head. That was it. Men like Bascom became leaders because of the very thing Durling now faced. Bascom saw to it that the most influential of the better element would suffer financially without him—until he became strong enough to take what he wanted from all.

No, a man couldn't attend strictly to his own business; he had to defer to decency.

Durling walked toward the Gold Peak.

He glanced into the millinery shop as he passed. The next building, a small grocery, sat back thirty feet; the marshal and the scrawny nester had got together again in the area between the grocery porch and the sidewalk, with Durling overhearing enough to determine that the nester had

slow-elked a Slash B yearling. The marshal, seeing Durling, said, "Say, fellow, Be sure your men can handle your cattle. We don't want them stampeding and tearing hell out of the town."

Durling kept walking.

"I'm talking to you."

Durling ignored him and heard him say to the nester, "Hotheaded Southerner. I guess I gave him the idea I'm afraid of him. Hey, you, hold on!"

Durling increased his stride, threw aside his cigar, and turned into the Gold Peak. He made no attempt to don his gunbelt; he hadn't time; gripping his Colt, he swung around to see the marshal outside the swinging doors. The lawman pushed only halfway in, to reassure himself that Durling actually had come in for his six-gun, and then he backed out, since Durling had him covered, his blue eyes gleaming maliciously.

Durling watched the swinging doors fan themselves motionless; and a bartender behind him said, "Cowboy, put your gun back and go take your pistol-whipping."

Durling said, "Hand me my belt," and he put it on without taking his gaze off the batwings, one of which he pulled inward

THE SILENT

By

DAVID CREWE

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and held open with his body while he reconnoitered the sidewalk. Three men stood near, and he said to them, "Don't watch me. Go on away." The men, red-shirted muckers, moved off.

Durling waited several minutes, the saloon no longer noisy behind him.

He took off his hat, eased out, and flattened himself against the plate glass window, making his way to the corner of the building and turning into the three-foot passageway between it and the building beside it. He put on his hat and made his way as silently as he could, considering his tinkling rowels, to the rear, where he cautiously looked past the back of the Gold Peak at the barbershop, thinking, Whichever door he's at, he's got somebody watching the other one.

The gray hat brim appeared first, and then the marshal, exhausting his patience and underestimating his foe, came boldly out, his intention now being to fetch Durling from the Gold Peak bodily; but Durling straightened and came into sight, saying, "You dumb son of a gun," and shot three times to the marshal's once, knocking the big man down with a chest full of .44 slugs, himself unscathed.

Durling reloaded his gun.

THE men at the bridge, witnessing it all, came running at an angle up the slope, kicking trash aside; and the middle-aged man said, "If Bascom's dead, Jim, it just the same as makes you marshal. That gal of mine will sure be tickled."

Those who gathered from the Gold Peak and other places had nothing to say; all waited for Durling to do the talking, so he told them, "I'll be in my hotel room if you want me," and he headed for the sidewalk.

Word of the impending gun battle had already spread, and now news of the outcome was called from group to group. The dark-haired girl stood outside the millinery shop, waiting for Durling, wanting to say

something, but when he came along, the knowledge that it was she who had had Bascom killed held her mute. Durling didn't see her.

He entered the hotel lobby, where four townsmen and the balding clerk awaited his arrival, but he walked to the stairway before asking, "What will happen to Bascom's ranch and other property?"

"Mr. Bascom leaves a widow. A very nice woman. With Wade Reynolds to depend on, we feel that she'll be better off, actually. Mr. Bascom wasn't too considerate of her at times."

Durling gave the clerk a nod.

He went up to his room, threw his hat on the bureau, and sat down; but he got up soon to move about restively, mopping his brow, coming to the window and pushing aside the curtains to look down among the trees, waiting, listening, expecting gun shots but hoping not to hear any. Nothing disturbed the town; only the everyday noises of men at work drifted up; so Durling sank again into a chair. After a while a commotion in the corridor brought him to his door, where he faced a crowd, mostly sodbusters, all jubilant, nearly all talking at once, with Sam Woodruff saying, "Get your hat, young fellow."

Durling said, "Why?"

Woodruff said: "We're having a little shindig over across the gorge. Sort of in your honor. On account of we get a say-so in the bridge now. The time is over when Bascom can run our lives. From now on the place is going to be a community run. Here, shake hands with my daughter Tessie." He drew the girl forward.

"You mean this red-headed chicken-kicker?"

Tessie Woodruff said, "You want me to bust you one on the nose?"

Woodruff said, "She's just like her mama. All bark and no bite. Don't you pay any attention to her, Durling," but Durling did.

• • •

By **WILLIAM L.
JACKSON**



NESTER, PULL STAKES!

Buck Martin had a reputation for never leaving a nester on his grass. The only trouble was that nester John Cobb had a reputation for never moving for any man.

ON THE edge of the great Western prairie John Cobb walked off his claim. From here could be seen the distant mountains, and here the land shook off its monotonous flatness and shouldered upward in rolling hills loosely timbered with fir and hardwoods. Here the soil was poorer than on the prairie and harder to plow; they were forty miles from the town about which the other fami-

lies in the immigrant train had settled, and they would have no neighbors.

"The prairie land will dry up and blow away when it's plowed," Cobb told his wife. "I want land near some timber to hold the rain. Neighbors will come sooner or later. Also, with the fever spreading through the train, it's best to get young John away from it. The trip has been hard on him, and we could lose him if he takes it."

"Then we'll go on," Martha said. "We might as well find what we want after coming so far."

Upon their arrival the days were clear and warm, but the first bite of winter was in the night air and, day by day, the rustling of grass in the meadows and leaves in the forest grew steadily crisper as all green things began to curl and die. In every direction there was work for them and, gaunt as they were from the long trip, they counted the things to be done and started them.

Each day until dark the rhythmic ringing of John's axe in the forest was interrupted only by meals and the necessary trips with the wagon horses to snake logs out to the cabin site. At night he was a never-resting shape before the flickering light of his work fire until Martha's voice called him to bed, and after kissing her lightly he would sigh once and fall instantly asleep.

In addition to the cooking and washing and mending of clothes worn threadbare with two thousand miles of travel, Martha did what she could to help him, and kept young John out of his father's way. With hands already reddened by the endless chores they had known on the way west she rived and stacked shakes for the roof, and dug gray, slippery clay for the fireplace from the bank of a creek half a mile away. When he struggled and sank inches into the loamy soil from the weight of a notched log far too heavy for one man and his crude block and tackle, her strength

often gave him the slender margin needed to put the timber into place.

When the walls were up, she supplied him with shakes as he laid the roof overhead, and while he worked above her she kept her hands busy chinking the walls with the same gray clay which he later mixed with dead grass for the fireplace. While their slow fire dried the firewalls and chimney to brick hardness, he put down the wooden floor he had promised her, and she smoothed each puncheon until from wall to wall there was not a rough spot to later turn up splinters.

During these days young John was as manageable as a six-year-old can be, and made himself useful fetching tools for his father and watching Martha's cook pots. The wide-eyed calmness with which he surveyed the house raising surprised her daily and brought her worried gaze upon him when he developed a slight cough; but it was not until the day that they moved into the cabin that he vomited and burned at her touch and let her know that he was infected, with the scarlet fever which had ravaged the families of other immigrants in the wagon train.

This ruined the joy of their first day in the new home, and John had only a dim pride in his voice when he said, "This will beat any sod house the people on the prairie have put up; you can bet on that."

In spite of his fever, they put his small bed near the fire, for they knew that he must not now be chilled. Throughout the night they remained by his side until dawn began to gray the eastern sky. Then, looking at John's gaunt face, Martha persuaded him to go to bed by promising that she would sleep that morning while he watched.

While he slept she looked at his broad, relaxed face and saw the deep-cut lines and thinness put there by their journey and the ceaseless work here. She lifted her hands to her own cheeks and thought, Why, it's done the same to me. It's been hard on all of us.

She continued bathing young John's face with damp cloths, and when in his restless sleep he kicked the blankets off she brought them over him again. She rested but could not sleep that morning while John sat with him, and in the afternoon she said, "He's sleeping now. Why don't you go outside?"

He nodded and looked down at the boy, and a heavy soberness pushed much of the roundness from his lips and took the squareness from his broad shoulders. He made a long chore of putting on his boots, and the sight of the land through the open door brought none of the usual lift to his face. The corners of his broad mouth appeared pale and pinched, and there were dull things which she could not entirely read in his eyes. He looked again at young John and stamped outside as if driven away by the sight of his sick son.

He soon appeared with the team in the broad meadow which sloped away from their door, and all afternoon his plow laid aside long black coils of topsoil never before touched by a plow. He spoke often and sharply to the team, and his plowed corners were meticulously square. Martha knew he was finding no pleasure in the work; it was only something to keep his mind and body in motion.

THAT night young John ate a little and kept it down, and they devised a means of tucking the larger blankets from their bed about him and under his mattress so he could not kick them off. Both she and John slept that night, though she often woke and sat up when young John tossed and coughed.

On the third day the scarlet rash which gave the fever its name came upon him, first showing its angry color upon the warm, moist parts of his body and finally leaving untouched only a starkly pale region about his mouth. At a distance it was a uniform red flush, but at close hand the individual scarlet spots could be discerned.

His body again burned at her touch, and he showed no interest in food.

Once more John was driven from the cabin by the sight of his son's restless, burning body, and, before he returned, his harrow had reduced the black coils of plowed earth in the meadow to a clodless, even plot ready for seeding. "It's small enough, heaven knows," he said, "but it'll take all the seed I have, and it's not a bad start."

He looked at young John, and his desperation came to the surface as though a door suddenly opened within him. "It's good soil, Marth," he said, "and it'll be a pretty farm someday, but it'll be a rotten piece of land for us if we lose him here. I wish to God there was more we could do for him."

"We're doing all we can," she said, "and this kind of fever always lasts a while. He'll get better." Silently, deep within herself, she said, He has to, do you hear me, God? Oh, please.

Young John seemed to rest that night, and in the morning John went into the meadow with his grain sack and sowed their wheat in a golden arc before him across the moist earth. He had finished and returned to the cabin late in the afternoon when a strange rider came from the timber onto the unplowed portion of their meadow.

John went from the cabin to meet him, and Martha felt her heart sink as she saw the stranger's tall hat and noted the easy grace with which he straddled his big, quick-stepping bay horse. The rope coiled on his saddle, the rifle in his saddle-boot, and the black-handled revolver on his hip plainly marked him as a rider for some cattle outfit.

He was a tall man, broad chested and slat hipped, his face dark with several days' growth of beard. Martha judged him as not over twenty, but he accepted John's greeting with an easy, cocky nod, and his eyes brightly smiled contempt at

sight of the nester's animals and outfit. He surveyed Martha boldly and indolently hitched one foot up onto his saddle.

"It's too bad you've already built your cabin and put a crop in, nester," he said. He half-grinned, and he uttered the word "nester" as if he had rolled it about in his mouth and disliked its taste.

Martha saw the bunching of muscles across John's shoulders and watched him half turn as if to fix her location in his mind. "We thought it was a fair job for the time we've had," he said. He swung one broad hand to take in the cabin and the freshly planted wheat field. "Why does that seem unfortunate to you?" His voice was as soft as she had ever heard it, and she saw that the step he had taken with his gesture put the point of his shoulder almost against the corner of the cabin wall.

"Because you're on Hatrack range, and Buck Martin will sure be asking you to move." There was no sympathy in the man's voice, rather a laughing confidence which roughened his words.

"Then there's some misunderstanding," John said. "The land agent who settled the families we came out with on the other side of town told me this was free range almost to the mountains."

The younger man laughed shortly. "That isn't so on Buck's map," he said. "Hatrack was having beef butchered by Indians in this country before you ever heard of it. Buck's never had a nester on his grass and don't expect to live to see it. You might call it a matter of reputation with him."

"And I should pull stakes right away so as not to injure his reputation, is that it?" An edge had come into John's voice, and his gray eyes were cloudy with a temper worn thin by all he had been through in this country.

The Hatrack rider's face lost its humor, and he dropped his indolently slung leg from the saddle. "There's no sense in

getting woolly about it," he said. "Buck's got fifteen riders working for him, and any one of them could put you off alone."

John Cobb smiled then, a deceptively pleasant smile, and his upper body seemed to broaden as he lifted his shoulders and took a step forward. Anticipation of a rough but pleasant chore was bright in his eyes as he softly, pointedly said, "Any one of them?"

This clear challenge rocked the younger man back in his saddle, and he showed his teeth in a sudden, wicked smile. His hand fell quickly to his leg, and he said, "Nester, you're a fool to brace a man with a gun."

John smiled again, a thinner, quicker smile, and with a single flinging motion threw his arm around the corner of the cabin. His body twisted sideward and back, and he turned about with his rifle rising in his hands. It stopped the Hatrack man's motion. It froze him in the saddle and took the color from his face.

"Your judgement's poor," John said. "We're slow people, and we're pretty well worn by a long trip, but we're not clods for you to kick about as you please. Our claim to this land is a legal one; your outfit's claim is not. Get off my place, and don't ever try to draw a gun on me again."

The younger man nodded, caught by the rifle muzzle's black stare. A slackness came to his cheeks, and he was careful about moving his hands to lift the bay horse's reins. "Just so, nester," he said. "You're not slow." He wheeled his horse about, looking back over his shoulder, and as John's rifle came down, just before he spurred the bay away in a great leap, he said, "But are you fast enough?"

John watched him out of sight in the timber, and, when he turned about to place his rifle against the cabin wall, anger still brought a streakiness to his cheeks and made his mouth unkind. "There are more where he came from," he said. "You heard

him say it. Alone, I might give them some trouble, but I can't leave you and the boy here to go prowling off in the timber to bother them; they'll know that. We'll not bundle our things together today or tomorrow, but we might as well keep it in mind that they can probably run us off if they really want to."

His big farmer's hands clenched, and he shrugged his heavy shoulders. "A matter of reputation, he says," he said. "Well, that's something we lack out here, and he wasn't speaking of the kind we left behind us. I've never shot at a man in my life, and I don't think I'd like to. But probably any one of them would just as soon mark another nester as a notch on his gun."

She put her work-reddened hands against the door frame and felt in the rough wood the work they had put there. She lifted her head and gave him the faintest of smiles. "Now, John, it hasn't come to that yet, and probably never will. He was a bluff of a man if I ever saw one, trying to make himself big. This Buck Martin may be nothing like he paints him."

John shrugged again and glanced at his rifle as if marking its location in his mind. "Time enough to worry about trouble when it comes. Now, how is the boy?"

IN THE afternoon she would have said that he could get no worse and still live, but that night he proved her wrong. He resisted taking even the cool water she gave him, and his throat and tongue took on an angry red brighter than the rash upon his body. He tossed and threw himself limply about on his bed, and he suffered rigors which stiffened him from head to toe. His eyes opened without seeing, and he made the pitiful sounds of a child in delirium which no parent should have to hear.

They took what sleep they got that night in snatches, and the cabin was filled from

wall to wall with the sound of young John's feverish struggling and breathing. Shortly after daybreak John dressed and stood by his son's bed, and in the dim light his face was made long and homely by his worrying. He placed his hand on the boy's burning forehead, and the strong line of his lips wavered and broke.

"He's in bad shape, Marth," he said. "He'll have to eat something soon or it can only go one way. Yesterday I thought he was getting better, but he's not. I'd like to take one of the horses and ride over to the settlement. Those people were fighting this long before he got it, and maybe they've learned something about it. I could be back by dark."

Hesitancy and desperation were at war in his words, and, as always, she offered him her quiet courage. "Why, you go ahead, John," she said. "I'll be all right here. I'll go into the woods and get some sassafras for tea. My mother used to give it to us when we had a fever and would eat nothing."

He brought one of the team horses in front of the cabin, and as he mounted he said, "Don't worry about trouble from the cattle outfit. They'll be giving us a while to make up our minds." Nevertheless, she noted that he left her the rifle.

She spent half the morning with young John, and once got him to take some broth, but he could not keep it down. At mid-morning she made him as comfortable as possible and told him that she was going away for a while. When she reached the edge of the timber she discovered a horse's hoofprints in the soft earth of the meadow, and she knew that here some rider had silently sat and watched their cabin within the past twenty-four hours. She returned to the cabin for the rifle, and with the gun carried awkwardly under her arm started out again, trying to remember the nearest spot where she had seen the broad, mitten-shaped leaves of a sassafras bush in the woods.

With some difficulty she placed this spot in her memory and reluctantly passed out of sight of the cabin. The country was quite rolling here, heavily timbered on its slopes and grassy in its valleys. In one of these valleys which skirted the main mass of timber ran an ill-defined cattle trail, and here she discovered more fresh hoofprints in the soft earth. In a sudden moment of fear she wondered if this man, whoever he was, had seen John leave the cabin that morning.

Overlapping branches above her changed the sun's brightness to a dappled pattern on the forest's floor, and she found herself unnecessarily startled by the sudden noises of small animals escaping underfoot and birds which burst from the brush as she passed. She held the rifle constantly before her as she went deeper into the timber, and she placed it within easy reach when she reached the sapling-like bush she was seeking.

She took both bark and leaves from the sassafras, shaping the whole dew-wet mass into a bundle which she could carry under her arm. Under her other arm she tilted the rifle and started back. She was traveling a ridge above the valley through which the cattle trail wound when she heard the sound of dully thudding hooves and the distant bawling of many cattle.

The cabin was in sight before her, and she was almost at the edge of the newly turned wheat field. Here she sank down in the underbrush, her heart thudding wildly against her ribs, the bundle of sassafras leaves and bark momentarily forgotten beside her. The sound of hooves in the valley grew louder, and soon she saw the first white faces of a long herd of cattle come into view about a turn in the trail. They came on until it seemed that here were more cattle than she had seen in her life, though she knew the entire herd could not number more than a hundred head.

Three riders came into view behind them, and one of them she recognized as the

man who had stopped at their cabin yesterday. Another of the trio was obviously not a young man. He sat rail-straight in the saddle, but his age was given away by the set of his shoulders and by starkly white eyebrows against a weather darkened face. She knew that beneath this man's tall and battered hat must be white hair or no hair at all.

This older man made some motion with his hands or body which she failed to detect, and the younger man whom she had recognized broke from the trio and spurred his horse the length of the herd to turn the lead cattle off the trail and start them up the steep side of the valley. The other two men kept a constant pressure upon the rear animals, and soon the entire herd was pressing upward on the slope, the lead cattle reluctant to leave the grass of the valley for the timber, but forced upward by the pressure of animals behind them.

The lead cattle came bawling up the slope, their wide eyes rolling wildly as they reached the crest, and Martha had a sudden stark vision of the newly planted wheat field beneath their churning hooves. She thought of standing and shouting, and then she remembered the tracks she had seen in the meadow. Why, they know the planted field is there she thought. This is deliberate. She was suddenly thoroughly outraged.

Anger came upon her so strongly that for a moment she could not see clearly, and she gripped the rifle in her hands until her fingers ached. She thought, This is how John must have felt when he faced that man. She brought the rifle to her shoulder and found the horse of the man she had recognized in its sights. "God help me for killing such a beautiful animal," she murmured, and jerked the trigger.

The lead rider's horse screamed its pain and as suddenly died. It folded beneath its rider and threw him to the ground, and above him the lead cattle in the herd halted and swung away from the sudden report

of Martha's rifle. These animals turned and threw their weight upon the advancing herd; their panic was communicated to the cattle behind them; and in a moment the whole mass of beef was turning about upon itself.

The two remaining riders took themselves from the path of this suddenly turning tide, and the man on foot was in danger of being run down by bolting cattle at the edge of the herd. He yelled above the bawling of the herd, and his two comrades turned their horses up the slope to stand between him and the main body of beef, ready to take him off the ground if necessary. Martha came erect in the bushes, the rifle still held before her.

The man on the ground had drawn his gun, and he brought it up swiftly as he saw her, but the older man on horseback stopped his motion by shouting, "Hold it, Chet. It's a woman."

THE man on foot slowly brought his gun down, and Martha lowered her rifle as they came toward her. They halted almost upon her, and the older man said, "I'm Buck Martin, and you're the nester's wife. You're obviously handy with a rifle, and you've just killed a hundred dollars worth of cutting horse. Someone will have to pay for that."

Martha recoiled slightly at his name. She looked at his weather-and age-seamed face, his bright blue eyes, and shoulders held straight as a youngster's with at least sixty-five years upon them. In spite of herself,

she thought, why he's not an evil-looking man at all.

Her anger returned in less strength after this observation, and was more a stout determination than the blinding thing she had felt only minutes before. "And it will be you," she said. "How do you think we'd have measured the cost of our wheat field if I'd let you drive them through there as you were going to? You have other horses, but we'll have no other food next summer."

His face did not change expression. "Why, now, ma'am," he said, "how do you know we'd have run them over your wheat?"

"It's plain to see," she said. "I found somebody's tracks in our meadow this morning." She lifted an accusing finger toward the man on foot. "Probably from his shulking about, watching until John left."

Buck Martin glanced down at his unhorsed rider, his eyes suddenly bright with an obscure humor which was not lost upon the younger man. "I believe Chet did say that your man was a little rough for a nester," he said. "You appear to be his match."

She saw the rawness of stung pride in the glance the younger man flung at her. "No, I'm not John's match at this," she said. "If he'd been here this morning to meet you, there would be more than a dead horse here."

A hint of the smile in his eyes lifted the corners of Martin's lips. "You don't talk like a nester's woman," he said, "and your



husband doesn't sound like the usual nester to me. What's your name again?"

"I didn't give it to you before," she said. "It's Cobb."

"Well, Mrs. Cobb," he said, "why'd your husband pick my range to settle on?"

Some unexplainable change in his tone asked her for frankness, and she gave it to him. "Because he thinks the prairie will dry up and blow away under a plow, and because he wanted to get our boy away from the fever in the wagons. But it did no good. He caught it anyway."

Martin's glance quickly turned cold and flicked to the ground and back. "And that explains the sassafras," he said. He looked at the rider she had put afoot, and his voice was suddenly wickedly soft. "Chet, you didn't tell me there was a sick boy involved."

The younger man tossed his head up angrily. "Dammit, I didn't know there was. So far I've been licked all the way by these people."

Buck Martin looked beyond Martha at the snugly chinked cabin, the neatly arranged gear outside by the wagon, and the freshly seeded wheat field. "I think," he said quietly, "you needn't be ashamed of that."

He leaned forward with his hands on his saddle horn to give Martha his final close scrutiny. "We'll take care of the dead horse. You go and take care of your boy. Forget about trouble from this outfit."

He lifted his reins and looked at her with newly rising interest, his smile now completely released, his voice heavy with a chest-deep chuckling. "However," he said, "I think we ought to keep this between us as neighbors. As you might guess, I'm not in the habit of being backed off by a woman."

Quickly, Martha offered him her warm smile. "I did nothing this morning but gather sassafras," she said, and turned from him to happily retrieve her small bundle of leaves and bark from the ground.

Young John was awake when she reached the cabin, and he said weakly, "Who was shooting?"

"Just some hunters," she said. She put the rifle down and walked to his bed. She put her hand on his forehead and opened his mouth. "I think you're much better," she said. "Now I'm going to make some very special tea, and I want you to try hard to drink it."

While the child was drinking, Martha thought over the encounter with Buck Martin, and wondered at the violence of which she had not known herself to be capable—wondered and was glad, for the days ahead promised to be hard. But, waiting now for John, she was happy and at peace.

She met John in the doorway when he rode into the yard that night, and he shook his head and said, "Nothing. They know nothing. How is he?"

She offered him her warm smile. "He's better. He drank all the tea I made and ate a little something besides."

"I'm crazy," he said. "Before dark I saw some buzzards wheeling near here, and I thought . . . but it must have been some dead animal." His smile was a thing which started small and grew large, until as he bent over young John's bed his face was five years younger. "Thank God," he said, and walked once about the cabin as if he had never before been here.

"I've got some other news too," he said. "I met this Buck Martin in town. He was with the man who came here the other day. I thought I was in for some trouble, but they were actually civil. Marth, I think we're going to get along all right here now."

His pleasure communicated itself to her and she said almost laughingly, "We are if we can hold onto our present reputation."

She looked at him suddenly, wondering what explanation this quick remark would require, and from his bed young John said, "Pa, Ma saw some hunters in the woods today."

BRAVE HORSES AND IRON MEN!

By

DAVE SANDS



ONE of the most memorable horse races occurred in the Old West on June 13, 1893, when out of Chaldron, Nebraska, a group of cowboy riders set out on a one-thousand-mile chase which was to end in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show at the Chicago World's Fair.

Each man was allowed two horses. Many famous names of that era were included among the nine riders. The prize was to be \$1,000, half donated by buffalo Bill and half by the town committee of Chaldron.

As the horsemen galloped out of Chaldron that morning, Doc Middleton took the lead and arrived at Sioux City, the first of nine cities on the route, considerably in the lead. Trailing the pack was John Berry, a retired stagecoach driver to whom little attention had been paid. But deliberately starving himself to keep down the burden for his horses, Berry took the lead on the third day. Already two riders had dropped out. Doc Middleton's horse had sprained a leg and his spare soon gave out. Davy Douglas, a young jasper, had developed horse-riding nausea, not unlike sea sickness, and had to retire.

Another hombre, James Stephens, from Kansas City, riding only one

mount, poured whiskey in his horse's waterpail, but ended up at Fort Dodge when he began to share the stimulant. And one smart fellow, hoping to rest his mounts, tied the two horses together and ran behind, hanging on to the tail of the last one.

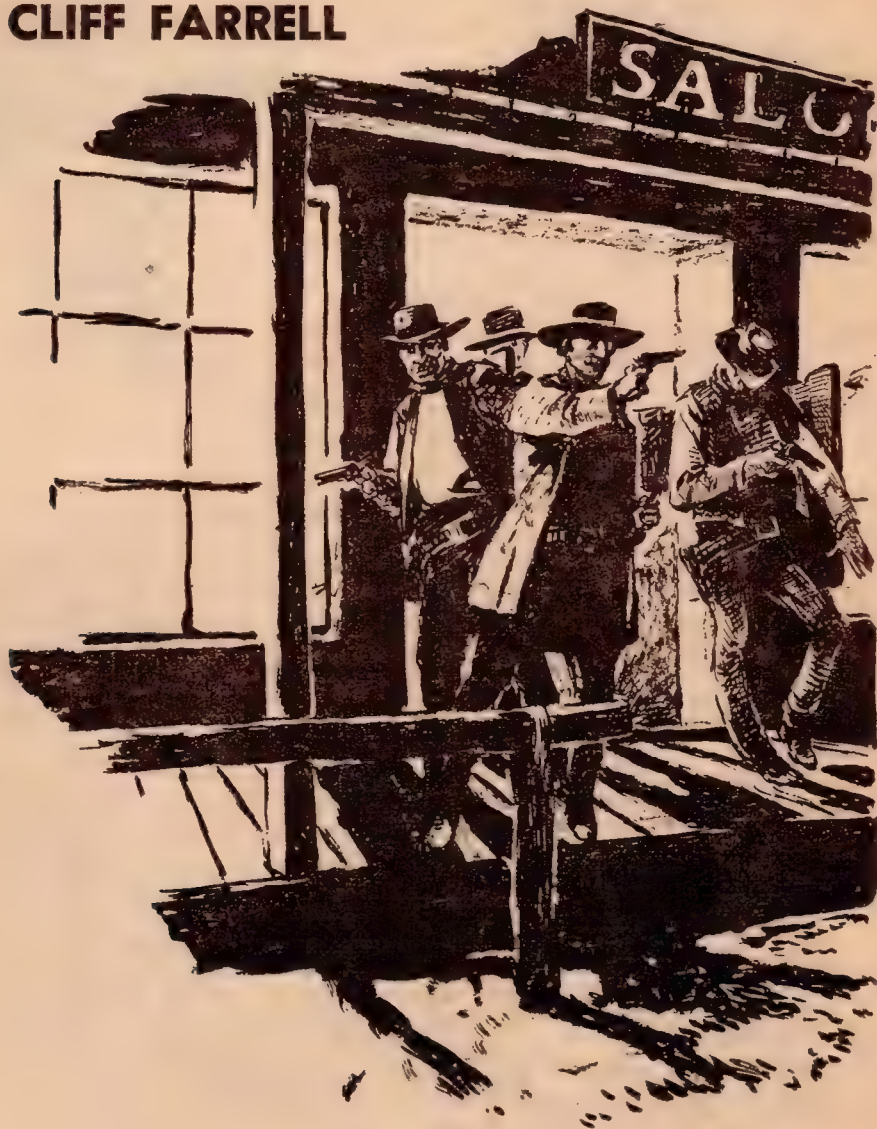
Berry held his lead into Waterloo, Iowa, where newspaper reporters tagged along by bicycle. On the fourteenth day Berry neared Chicago, with Smith and Gillespie not far behind. However, at DeKalb, Illinois, he was forced by the Humane Society to allow an inspector to trail along in a buggy to pass judgment on the treatment and condition of the horses. The remaining riders evaded this hindrance by putting every carriage in DeKalb under hire as soon as they arrived.

Nevertheless Berry, riding one hundred and fifty miles on the last day, came in first, beating even Albright, an ingenious soul who shipped his horses and himself from DeKalb in a boxcar. Berry had covered the entire distance in thirteen-and-one-half days, the greatest endurance record ever established by horse, and was awarded the prize by the famous Buffalo Bill amidst a crowd of cheering Exposition visitors.

• • •

RIDE THE DARK

By **CLIFF FARRELL**

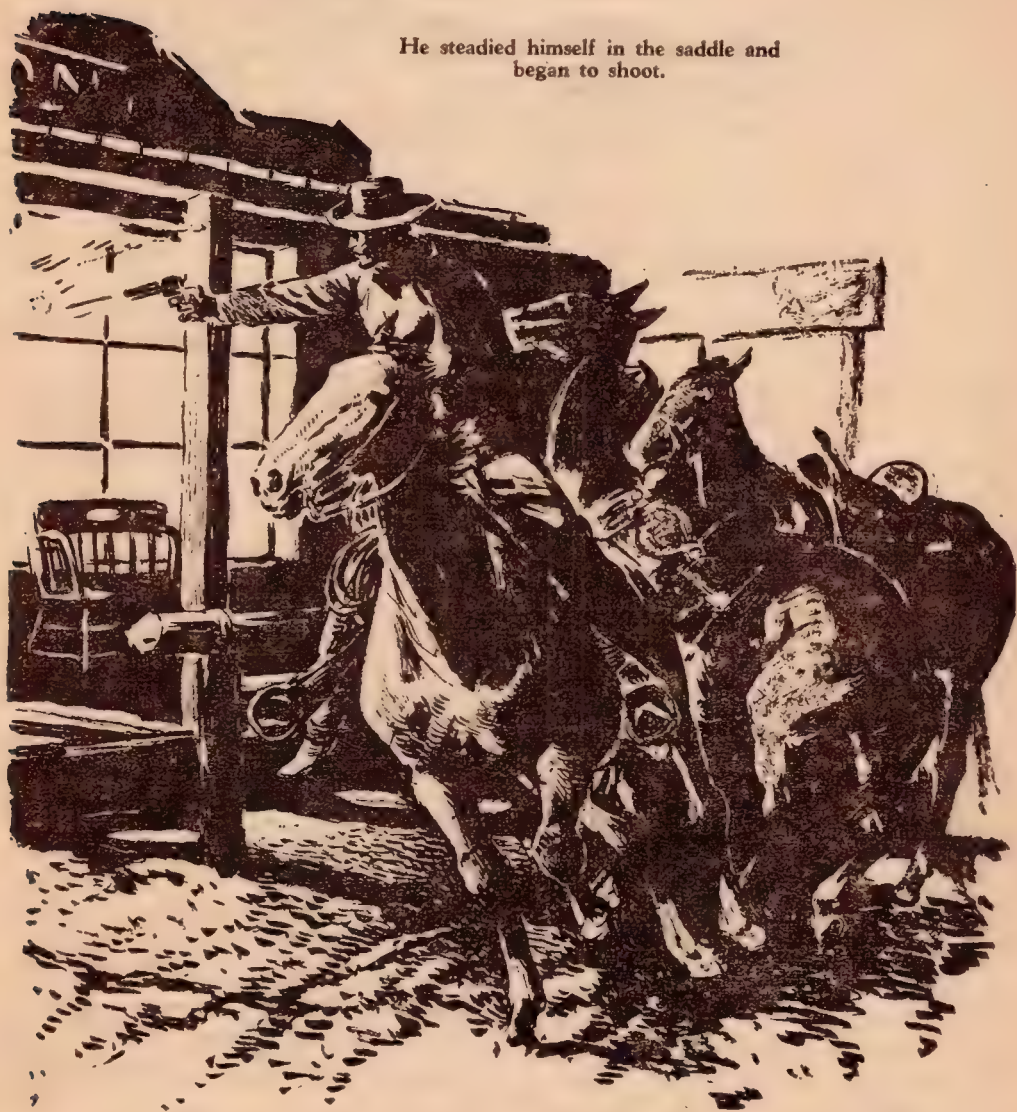


*"Maybe you're a coward if you ride
with Lon DeSpain—but you're a dead
man if you don't!"*

TRAIL

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He steadied himself in the saddle and began to shoot.



THE two strange riders curbed their horses in the ranch door yard with a swaggering insolence that cooled Tom Gilroy's welcoming smile. Because he was a newcomer in this range, having bought the little Two Springs 'spread on

the Anvil benches only three days previously, he had hoped that these arrivals would prove to be neighbors, coming to pay a hand-shaking call on a stranger.

But if they were neighbors he didn't like their earmarks.

They were lose-lipped, cocksure, and arrogant. The bigger one had a quirt in his hand, which he kept whacking into the dust near Tom's feet. Both wore the garb of cowpunchers, but they were too soft-looking to be real cowhands. Each packed a brace of six-shooters in tied holsters.

They took their time appraising the shake-roofed little ranch house, the sod wagonshed and haybarn, and the bleached pole cavy yard.

"So yo're the new ramrod o' Two Springs ranch?" the taller one said as he turned to Tom. "Name's Tom Gilroy, ain't it?"

"I'm Tom Gilroy. What's on your mind?"

Tom's voice was edged. These arrivals rubbed his fur the wrong way. Somehow they robbed the velvet June day of its clean, sparkling beauty and brought him back out of the golden clouds of optimism where he had been sailing ever since he had closed the deal for this little green, watered stretch of rangeland.

"I'm Punch Tripp," the man announced. "An' my sidekick is Chick Stiles. We figured it was high time we dropped in to talk business with you."

"Business?"

"Damned important busines fer you, Gilroy," Punch Tripp declared. "You got this spread dirt-cheap, didn't you?"

Tom looked them over from head to foot. He was a wiry, long-legged man, this Tom Gilroy, burned the color of an old saddle. He had crisp, sorrel-colored hair, and weather-puckered dark brown eyes. His mouth was straight, and he had a prominent chin and nose. A worn black-gripped six-shooter hung in a time-polished holster on his hip.

"What price I paid for Two Springs," he remarked, "is my own concern. Any other questions?"

Punch Tripp showed his ugly grin. "Kinda proud, I see. Hell, we know you got a bargain when you bought this place

from Ike Brean. You was smart enough to snap up a good buy when it was slung in your lap. But maybe you wasn't as slick as you figgered, Gilroy. Maybe Two Springs ranch ain't such a hell-roarin' bargain as it stacks up."

"Yeah?" Tom asked slowly. "How come?"

"Did you ever stop to wonder why Ike Brean was in such a lather to sell at a cut-rate price? Did he mention that this range is full o' onery outlaws who'd steal your eye-teeth if you slept with your mouth open? Did he tell you how many head o'cattle an' saddle-stock he lost to rustlers, an' how many he found poisoned or shot durin' the past year?"

Punch Tripp paused, and laughed tolerantly. "You're beginnin' to savvy that you bought a pig in a poke, Gilroy," he said. "Ranchin' in this Anvil range ain't all fun an' frolic."

"There's a certain medicine for rustlers an' stock killers," Tom said tersely. "It cures 'em permanent." He touched the handle of his gun.

Punch Tripp shook his head. "More'n one man has tried to buck this game single-handed, an' they're playin' a harp now. You'd git a slug between your shoulders if you tried it, Gilroy. But there's other ways o' protectin' yourself. That's why we're here this mornin'. We represent the Law an' Order Committee of Anvil Range."

"Vigilantes?"

"We prefer to call ourselves protectors o' the pore an' oppressed. We've got every rancher in the range signed up with us. Every one of 'em have found it well worth while. An outfit that we take under our wing ain't never bothered with beef thieves an' poisoners. We give one hundred percent guarantee. We're a sort of a range detective force."

"Why?" Tom asked slowly, "can't the sheriff of the county give a rancher the same protection?"

"Sheriff's hands are tied," Punch Tripp declared. "The commissioners are too tight with county money to hire him even one deputy. A lone man can't cover the ground. That's why a bunch of us got together an' formed the Law an' Order Committee."

"I see," Tom remarked. "How do I go about joining your committee?"

"You don't join, mister. We sell our services. Of course it costs a leetle. We hire fightin' men, an' pay fightin' wages. We'll patrol your range, and see to it that you're left in peace for a fee of let's say—about two hundred dollars a month."

THE truth dawned on Tom Gilroy then. "Why, you dirty crooks," he snapped. "This is a shakedown. You know damned well that it'd ruin a ranch of this size to pay that much."

Punch Tripp's swart companion had moved. A six-shooter appeared in his hand. "Keep a polite tongue in your head, feller," the man advised. "We're offerin' you a business proposition, an' nothin' more. We got somethin' to sell, an' you'll be smart if you buy it before we boost the price. We give value received. If you don't believe that, ask any rancher in this range if it don't pay to deal with the Law an' Order Committee."

Punch Tripp was still grinning. "We'll give you time to think it over, Gilroy," he put in. "An' we know that you'll realize that our offer is plenty reasonable."

They mounted. Chick Stiles kept his gun on Tom as they backed their horses out of range. They wheeled and rode away, chuckling.

Tom stood there, shaken by anger. A voice spoke behind him. "How do you like those sour apples, mister?"

He whirled. A girl had stepped around the corner of the ranch house, accompanied by a ruddy-cheeked, yellow-haired boy of about fourteen. It was the girl who had spoken. She was trim and womanly. Her blue eyes were big and direct. She wore

a pleated riding skirt and a lace-collared shirtwaist, and carried her range hat in her hand. She was well-tanned, with sun freckles dusted across her nose and cheekbones, and she had thick waving ash-blond hair.

"We were eavesdropping," she said frankly. "I'm Betty Leffler, and this is my brother, Jim-Bob. My father, Zeb Leffler, owns the Cross Buck ranch up at the base of the peak. We rode over to pay our respects, having heard that a new owner has taken over Two Springs ranch. We tied up in the brush when we recognized your visitors, and kept out of sight. It isn't healthy to be caught listening in on these slippery crooks when they're out to shake down a man. They don't like witnesses. I sympathize with you, Tom Gilroy."

"Sympathize?" Tom bridled. "I need no sympathy."

"Any man who tries to raise cattle in Anvil range deserves sympathy—and luck," she said grimly. "You may as well pay the money and save yourself a load of grief. They'll bring you to it sooner or later."

YOUNG Jim-Bob stepped forward, his blue eyes blazing. "Don't listen to her, cowboy," he blurted out. "Don't let her skewer you into bucklin' down to these crooks like the rest o' the yaller-bellies in this range has done. Even my dad's afraid of 'em, but you got the earmarks of a fightin' man. I seen a picture o' Wild Bill Hickok once, an' danged if you ain't got a jaw an' nose jest like his. I'd—"

"Wild Bill Hickok has been in his grave for years," the girl reproved. "An' that's where Mr. Gilroy will be if he listens to a rattle-brained child like you."

"Child?" the boy howled. "By grab, I kin lick my weight in wildcats an' give 'em first holt. I kin—"

"Take it easy, old timer," Tom grinned at the boy, "an' tell me what this is all about. Do you really mean that other

cattlemen have been bulldozed into payin' protection money to them two coyotes?"

"Punch Tripp and Chick Stiles aren't the men this range pays tribute to," the girl said bitterly. "They're only small fry. It's Lon DeSpain and Burt Bush who pocket the lion's share of the money. They stay in the background and pull the strings while the rest of us dance."

Tom was staring. "Burt Bush? Isn't he sheriff of this county?"

"Burt Bush is sheriff of Anvil County," the girl nodded. "He's supposed to represent the law, but the only law he enforces is Lon DeSpain's word. DeSpain, in case you don't know, is the leader of the Law and Order Committee. He calls himself an attorney. He has a fancy law office in town with his name painted on the door in gilt letters. But his real job is outside the law. He's a killer and a crook, and a leader of killers and crooks. He has placed a reign of terror over this range. He owns the sheriff, and most of the county officials. He demands his pound of flesh from every honest or dishonest citizen in this country. You'll pay plenty for his so-called protection, Tom Gilroy, or he'll ruin you as he would squash a tumblebug. No man dares stand against him."

CHAPTER

2

Lesson for a Rebel

Tom was staring incredulously. "You mean to say that one man has run a blaze on all this range?" he gasped, and his lips were curling. "What kind of spineless men do they grow in Anvil country? Why don't they run this Lon DeSpain over the hill?"

"You'll learn," the girl said wearily, "that Lon DeSpain isn't easy to run over the hill. He's a killer in his own right. He's got a dozen or more killers at his call. The sheriff and the crooked courts are on his side. An honest man doesn't stand a

chance. The way it stacks up no cattleman is working for himself. He's only Lon DeSpain's slave. DeSpain takes all their profits by extortion, skullduggery, fake lawsuits, padded tax assessments, arrests on trumpedup charges, and forty-nine other smart schemes. He doesn't want your grass. He only wants the profits from it."

She paused, looking down the ranch trail at two riders who were tiny specks at that distance. "Speaking of the devil," she said, "it seems that you're about to receive a personal call from his horned majesty. That looks like the red roan that Lon DeSpain always rides. Which means that the other man is Sheriff Burt Bush. They're always together."

The girl had moved back out of sight as she spoke. "Jim-Bob and I will lay low in the house," she added. "Luckily, we left our horses in the brush beyond the corral where they won't be seen. DeSpain will talk freely if he thinks there are no witnesses present. I'm curious to hear what he has to say to you."

The girl and her brother ducked quickly into the house. Tom turned and watched the two riders lope up the wagon road. His lips were twisted in a mirthless smile. His mind was flashing back over ten years of ceaseless drifting and will-o'-the-wisp existence that had tumble-weeded him from Mexico to Canada and back again. Always he had been seeking something that he could not identify. Cow-punching, prospecting, railroading.

He had worked in Mexican oil fields, and mushed through the frozen muskeg on Canadian gold stampedes. He had herded sheep. He had known prosperity and starvation. But always he had returned to cattle. Each time he acquired a stake he had gone back to ranching. And time after time he had gone broke. Blizzards, droughts, financial panics, had wiped him out.

And now once more he had a ranch, bought at a bargain price, in as rich and green a range as he had ever seen. In the three days he had lived at this Two Springs ranch he had fallen in love with the mountainous, timbered range. Here, he realized, was the cow-country he had always been hunting. Here was the end of his tumbleweed trail.

As he waited the approach of these two overlords of Anvil range he was thinking that this was the way his luck always had run. Blizzards, droughts, bank failures—and now killers!

TOM GILROY nudged his gun around and waited. And Betty Leffler, who had been peering through an opening in the chinking of the house, spoke in a sudden fervent warning.

"No! Forget your gun, Tom Gilroy. You don't stand a chance. DeSpain has killed half a dozen men in bullet duels. He's fast. They say there's no fear in him, and he's part devil and part snake. Don't try to fight him. You'll only die."

Tom made no response. He stood there as the arrivals loped into the dooryard and pulled up. Lon DeSpain was lean, sparsely-built, with a bony, colorless face, and hot, penetrating black eyes set beneath arched, thin brows. He wore a knee-length broadcloth coat, which hung open to show a sateen waistcoat. An ivory-handled six-shooter hung in a patent-leather holster at his side. A pigeon's egg ruby glowed in his pleated stock.

Burt Bush, the sheriff, was heavy of body and gross. Puffy pouches hung beneath his whisky-bleared eyes. He wore gaudy yellow batwing chaps, and a stiff-brimmed cream-colored hat. A gold sheriff's star was pinned to his green silk shirt.

Burt Bush dismounted and produced a legal document. "Yo're Tom Gilroy," he said, stating it as a fact. "Here's a summons fer you."

"Summons?" Tom said, and did not accept the paper.

Burt Bush tossed it at his feet. "You're bein' sued fer damages, Gilroy," he snapped. "A loco steer, belongin' to you, mauled a lady yesterday, inflictin' injuries an' shock. The lady, who works in a honky-tonk in town, was ridin' peacefully along a public highway when this loco critter charged out'n the brush, hooked her horse so that it had to be shot, an' injured her."

Lon DeSpain dismounted. "I represent the plaintiff in this action, Gilroy," he said. "Allow me to introduce myself. Lon DeSpain, attorney at law. I'm prepared to offer a reasonable settlement out of court. My client will accept one thousand dollars as sufficient compensation for her injuries."

Tom picked up the summons and tore it into shreds. "DeSpain," he said, "I don't stand for shake-downs in any shape or form. I'm not payin' any thousand dollars to settle a fake damage claim any more'n I'm goin' to pay two hundred a month for protection from killers an' thieves. Don't step on me too hard, DeSpain, or I'll turn an' fang you. Is that plain?"

"I don't follow you," DeSpain said suavely. "Shake-down is a harsh term to use to a reputable attorney. I don't like it. No, I don't like it at all. It angers me, and when I become angry I usually regret the results, after it's too late. You're a young man. I'd be sorry if I was forced to kill you."

Burt Bush spoke up scoffingly. "Let him go, Lon. Hell, he's a stranger. Give him a chance to learn. Then he'll know how to act when he's talkin' to his betters. Let's head back to town. He'll come around peacefully later on. They all do."

Lon DeSpain nodded. "We'll meet again, Gilroy," he said, smilingly, "Until then, *adios*."

Tom watched them go. In spite of himself the flesh along his spine was prickling.

Betty Leffler and her brother stepped from the house. The girl's face was ashen.

"You understand now," she said shakily. "He isn't human. He always smiles like that—even when he's killing a man."

"Does your father pay tribute to that devil?" Tom asked bluntly.

The girl nodded, and there was shame in her eyes. "They all do. Every rancher in this range. They tried to fight back at first, but they learned that it was cheaper and healthier to pay—just as you'll learn. Ask any of them. Ask my dad. Ask Uncle Jim Hardy at the Winged H. Ask the Rasmussen brothers over on Paint Creek, or the Dedricks. Ride up and down the range as far as you wish. They all hate DeSpain, but they fear him more than they hate him. And they pay tribute to him—every one of them."

"You think I'll fall in line too?" he said bleakly. "You think DeSpain will break me like he's broke the spirit of the others?"

"You're dead a long time," she said wearily. "It isn't worth it, Tom Gilroy."

Her brother spat scornfully in the dust. "I'm practicin' the draw, Tom," he announced. "When I git good enough I'm goin' after Lon DeSpain, an' build a smoke under him. I'll peel his hide an' I'll run Burt Bush an' the rest of them gunnies out of this range."

Tom shook hands with the boy. "I've got at least one fightin' man on my side," he said. "An' maybe one fightin' woman. Your sister is hollerin' wolf at me, but I got a hunch she ain't as spooked as she pretends." He looked at the girl. "How about it? Are you afraid of Lon DeSpain too?"

Betty Leffler flushed, and tried to evade. "N-no," she murmured. Then her chin lifted, and her voice steadied and took on depth in response to his challenge. "I'm not afraid of him," she added. "If I were a man, I'd—"

"Fight?" Tom finished for her when she

hesitated. "An' that's what I aim to do. DeSpain can be stopped. Every man can. He might have a big organization back of him, but if you step on the head of a snake, the body dies too. Always remember that."

The girl impulsively extended her hand. "I'll do everything I can to help," she said huskily. "Everything."

AS HE touched her small hand Tom was keenly aware of her healthy, vital beauty. Her eyes dropped before his gaze, and she turned hastily away, ordering Jim-Bob to bring up the horses.

"Good-bye," she said as she swung into the saddle. "And be careful. Always be careful."

Then she rode away with her youthful brother, leaving Tom alone with his problem.

"She must be wrong," he muttered aloud. "There's bound to be some fightin' men on this range. I'll round 'em up."

He saddled up and headed down the benches. He spent the afternoon visiting neighboring ranches. This was a country of small spreads. Before sundown Tom had called at seven ranch houses within a ten-mile radius of his Two Springs place, shaking hands with owners and introducing himself. Ostensibly he was paying the duty call of a newcomer. In reality he was weighing his neighbors in the balance.

At each ranch he casually brought up the name of Lon DeSpain, and watched its effect upon his listeners.

When he headed homeward at sundown, his jaws were grim, and disappointment shadowed his eyes. Everywhere he had found fear—fear of Lon DeSpain. A fear so great that they always quickly changed the subject when Tom mentioned the lawyer's name. Betty Leffler had been correct in her appraisal of Anvil range. Men lived in the shadow of terror here—a shadow that would never be dispelled as long as DeSpain was free to ride the Anvil country.

PURPLE twilight had come when Tom rode up to his corral. And then his horse recoiled, snorting in terror. Tom froze in the saddle, staring into the enclosure.

He had been holding eight of his best cow ponies in the cavy yard, graining them in preparation for round-up work later on. Among them had been El Capitan, his personal, blooded bay which had been his companion on long, tumble-weed-ing trails in the past.

The corral was now a slaughter pen. Eight stiff-legged carcasses lay in grotesque postures on the hoof-beaten clay.

Moving like a man numbed by a blow, Tom climbed the fence and walked among the dead animals. Every horse had been shot through the head. He saw the glint of empty rifle shells lying under the bottom rail. Someone had sat on the corral fence, picking off the animals one by one. By the signs, the slaughter had taken place early in the afternoon, shortly after he had pulled out to interview his neighbors.

CHAPTER

3

Rule of Ruin

Tom stood looking down at the dead horse, El Capitan, and the world was hazed with red. It was like standing over the body of a murdered friend.

After a time he walked numbly to the house. He still had a score of horses out in the pasture, but the pick of the *remuda* lay there in the charnel pen.

He halted as he reached the door. Two figures arose and moved up.

A sneering voice spoke. "Howdy, Gilroy. We drifted back this way, figurin' that maybe you'd changed your mind about our Law an' Order Committee now that you had time to mull it around. We're still willin' to take Two Springs ranch under our wing at the price we stated this mornin'. How about it?"

The intruders were Punch Tripp and Chick Stiles. They wore heavy saddle coats, and had their hands jammed deep in the big pockets. Tom knew that they were clutching cocked six-shooters ready to shoot him down if he made a move to draw. He also knew that these two hard-eyed men were the ones who had slaughtered his saddle string. This was Lon DeSpain's way of bending a man to his will.

Tom restrained the icy rage that urged him to go for his gun regardless of odds. He realized that he didn't stand a chance under the circumstances. He hesitated a moment, and then said: "We'll talk it over. Let's step inside where we can take the weight off our hoofs."

"You go in first, Chick," Punch Tripp said. "An' light a lamp."

They were taking no chances. Punch Tripp walked a pace back of Tom as they entered the lamplit house.

"Make yourselves at home, boys," Tom said. "Shed your coats, an' I'll rustle some grub."

"We'll keep our coats," Punch Tripp grinned. "Never mind the grub. We ain't stayin' long. The price for our work will be two hundred a month, in advance. If'n you don't have the cash you kin sign a bill of sale over to Lon DeSpain for some beef steers. Twenty-five head will be about right. We'll cut our own critters tomorrow, an' vent 'em out to the Law an' Order Committee."

Tom nodded. He unbuckled his gunbelt and hung it on a wall peg, and moved away from it. Punch Tripp winked at Chick Stiles, and their vigilance began to relax. They swaggered a little. They felt that they had cowed this bronzed newcomer completely. Punch Tripp withdrew his hands from his concealed guns, and began rolling a cigarette.

"You're smart, Gilroy," he said mockingly. "Too bad you didn't sign up with us earlier. It would have saved everybody some trouble—an' some good horses. I

warned you that you'd be visited unless you had our men lookin' out for your rights. We seen them dead broncs in the corral."

"A man lives an' learns," Tom agreed.

AS HE spoke he whirled, his fist crashing against Chick Stiles' jaw. Both of the killers had been caught flat-footed, lulled by Tom's apparent docility. Stiles' jawbone cracked under the sledge-hammer punch, and his body went hurtling against his companion.

Punch Tripp, with his hands busy with the cigarette, reeled off balance. He clawed for his pocketed guns, but too late. Tom was upon him like an avalanche. He drove the man back against a wall, pinned him with one hand and smashed him in the face with two crushing blows. Blood spurted, and Punch Tripp's nose flattened into a gory pulp. He began to buckle at the knees. Tom measured him and drove a punch to the base of the jaw. Tripp's head rocked limply on his lean neck, and he crumpled in a soggy heap—knocked cold.

Chick Stiles also lay dazed and moaning, clutching at his shattered jaw.

Tom searched their pockets, and found a brace of six-shooters and a knife on each man. He slashed buckets of water over them until they sat up dripping.

Jerking them to their feet, he prodded them out of the house, at gun-point, located their horses, and kicked them into the saddles. Bringing up his own mount, he pointed at the trail.

"We're ridin' to town," he said.

They began to curse, then fell silent as he snapped a harsh admonition. He rode at their heels, gun in hand, during the ten-mile trip to Flintlock.

Only the saloons and gambling houses were lighted as they turned into the crooked street of the mountain cowtown. Tom accosted a cowboy who stood on the sidewalk.

"Where do I find Lon DeSpain, buckaroo?" he asked.

The cowboy stared at Tom's two hang-dog companions. "I seen DeSpain go into the Anvil Bar half an hour ago," he said uneasily. "He plays poker there every night."

Tom herded his captives to the Anvil Bar, jerked them to the ground, and prodded them through the door of the drinking house.

There were a dozen patrons at the bar, including three of the ranchmen Tom had visited that afternoon. The gambling tables were lightly patronized. At a rear table Lon DeSpain, Burt Bush and two gun-hung men were playing poker.

DeSpain's eyes lifted, and he gave a start as he saw Tom and the two bruised, bedraggled men.

Tom paused inside the door, and sent Punch Tripp and Chick Stiles ahead with a scornful shove.

"Here's your ketch dogs, DeSpain," he said, his voice loud in the silence. "Don't send 'em against me a second time, or I'll shoot their guts out. You owe me the price of eight horses, DeSpain. I'll call around to collect it one of these days. See to it that you don't run the bill any higher in the meantime."

Tom backed out of the door, leaving a stunned silence. He mounted and rode out of Flintlock unmolested.

At dawn, Tom brought the harness team from pasture, dragged the dead animals out of the corral and to a dry wash at a distance from the ranch. Covering the carcasses with oil-soaked brush he set the heap afire.

With the grim job completed he returned to the ranch, and found Betty Leffler and her ruddy-faced brother waiting. With them was a gaunt, mild-eyed cowman. This was their father.

Zeb Leffler measured Tom intently as they touched palms. "We heard what happened last night at the Anvil Bar, Gilroy," he said. "An' my daughter told me about meetin' you yesterday. I'm proud

to cross paws with a man that had the sand to take a fall out o' Lon DeSpain."

"By grab, I'd have give my spotted pony to have seen thet tinhorn's face when you told him off," Jim-Bob exulted.

There was mingling approval and doubt in Betty Leffler's face. "It—it was a reckless thing to do," she murmured. "I'm afraid you've only invited more trouble."

Her father nodded. "DeSpain will be out to teach you a lesson, Gilroy," he warned. "You better lay low fer awhile."

Tom turned, lifting a warning hand for silence. The faint report of a rifle came echoing down from a timbered slant west of the ranch flat. Another faint shot came drifting to their ears, and then a third and a fourth report.

Tom leaped into the saddle. "It might be a hunter," he gritted. "Then again there's a lot of my white-faced beef stock scattered in the brush along that slant."

He spurred away, and the Lefflers mounted and followed. Tom crowded his horse up the mountainside through the thick pine timber. Reaching an open draw, he pulled up suddenly.

Three of his Two Springs steers lay dead in the draw with the blood still welling sluggishly from bullet holes in their skulls. Farther on he located a fourth slaughtered animal.

The Lefflers arrived, staring dismally at the wanton destruction. Betty Leffler's eyes began to blaze. "The sneaking cowards!" she panted. "Strikin a man in the back like that. How long are you going to stand for things like this, Dad? How long are the ranchers going to let a pack of coyotes trample on them? Isn't it time the men of Anvil range began fighting back, or have all of you lost not only your nerve, but your pride?"

Zeb Leffler flushed. "What chance would we have ag'in DeSpain's killers?" he protested. "We ain't fightin' men."

"Cowards!" the girl exploded. "That's what you are. Every one of you."

A SHOUT from Jim-Bob aroused them. Smoke was pouring above the timber which screened Tom's ranch house in the flat below. Grimly they whirled their horses, and raced back to the spread. Reaching the clearing, they pulled up, staring heart-sick. Tom's house, and the wagon shed and barn were in flames. There was no hope of saving them.

"They shot the cattle to lure us away from the spread so they could set it afire," Tom said harshly.

The girl burst into tears. "Dad was right," she choked. "It's no use, Tom Gilroy. They'll beat you down, crush you, ruin you. You can't fight them single-handed."

"Are you turnin' yellow too?" Tom gritted. "This fight has only started."

"But what can you do? What can anyone do?"

"I told Lon DeSpain that I'd collect every penny of damage he did to my place," Tom said icily. "An' I meant what I said." "Don't try anythin' reckless, Gilroy, Zeb Leffler protested. "Don't take any chances."

Tom laughed at him, and the sound was not pleasant to hear. "You don't win a war without takin' chances, Leffler," he said. "I'll take my chances. Let Lon DeSpain take his."

He rode away from them abruptly, and vanished into the timber.

CHAPTER

4

The Game of Death

It was four nights later, and the waning moon was a silver scythe hanging above Flintlock town when Tom made his appearance again. He came riding alone out of the darkness into the midnight quiet of the cowtown, and dismounted at the Anvil Bar.

His jaws were unshaven, and he looked as if he had not slept under a roof since

the destruction of his ranch house. He wore no coat, and he removed his gunbelt and hung it on the saddle-horn. As he dismounted, he carried a small object, wrapped in a sun-browned scrap of newspaper.

He walked into the saloon, with the package under his arm. Patronage had dwindled at this late hour. Two ranchers from Anvil bench still lingered at the bar. The droning voice of a faro-case keeper sounded from a table.

At another table Lon DeSpain and Burt Bush were engaged in their nightly game of poker along with two of DeSpain's gunmen.

DeSpain discovered Tom's arrival instantly, and spoke a swift word that brought the sheriff and the two fighting men around in their chairs, their hands sliding to their holsters.

Seeing that Tom wore no guns, their tension slacked slightly. DeSpain leaned back, and his eyes were veiled as Tom came walking down the room. Because Tom had dropped out of sight for four days, the lawyer had begun to believe that he had left the country.

Tom was smiling coolly as he looked down at the table. "A poker game is just what a man needs for a let-down after poundin' a long trail," he said jubilantly.

He was pulling up a chair as he spoke. A wicked anger showed in DeSpain's eyes. "This is a closed game, Gilroy," he said thinly.

"Hell," Tom grinned. "You wouldn't deny a man a chance to get his losings back, now would you?"

"Losings?" DeSpain's brows arched. "I never played poker with you in my life. I've got none of your money."

"You forget about the cost of eight horses that you owe me, DeSpain," Tom corrected genially. "An' since then I lost four head of prime beef steers, a ranch house an' a haybarn."

As he spoke Tom removed the wrinkled

newspaper from the object he carried, revealing a quart fruit jar which seemed to be filled with an oil amber-colored fluid. He placed the jar on the table in front of him, handling it gingerly.

"Careful," he warned. "Don't bump the table, men, or this damned gin-mill will go sky-high an' all of us along with it."

They looked at the jar. It seemed innocent and harmless enough. It was the type that ranch wives use to preserve pickles and jams. Jars like that were as common as potatoes.

"High explosive," Tom exclaimed, gently tapping the metal lid of the container. "Crystals of nitro-glycerine, suspended in olive oil."

He grinned at them blandly. "Heavy olive oil is the safest cushion fer nitro when it crystalizes," he added. "The stuff's touchy as hell. You don't have to do more'n sneeze hard to set 'er off. It'd blow this bar-room to pieces if that happened. I grewed some gray hairs packin' thet jug two hundred miles, I'm here to tell you. I borrowed the crystals from some oil drillers in that new field they're provin' out down along Snow River. I used to work with some of them drillers in Mexico a couple of years back."

A dead silence had fallen. Lon DeSpain swallowed hard, as he stared unwinkingly at the small, jagged objects that could be seen dimly through the film of olive oil. He ran the tip of his tongue over his lips to moisten them.

"Don't move sudden-like, men," Tom cautioned again. "You might jar a table leg, an' bounce this thing on the floor."

Sheriff Burt Bush started to push back his chair, an inch at a time, while he stared at the jar like a man hypnotized. The two gunmen looked green around the gills, and sat rigid and motionless.

IN THE background, men with faces that were suddenly colorless, were sidling toward the door. They went carefully,

walking on tiptoe, and holding their breath.

Tom looked at the sheriff. "You ain't quittin' the game, Sheriff," he said, his voice liked edged, chilled steel. "It's your deal. Pull up your chair, an' let's get at it."

"Damn you," Lon DeSpain said, and there was a tremor in his hoarse voice. "You can't run a bluff on me."

DeSpain started to push back his chair. Tom reached out, caught his arm. That move jarred the table. The glass container teetered wildly, and Burt Bush, with a hoarse cry, lurched to rescue it.

Tom snatched up the jar before it fell. "Set down, DeSpain," he said harshly. "We're playin' poker."

DeSpain slowly settled back in his chair. Horror showed in his eyes. He seemed to have difficulty getting his breath.

"Deal, Sheriff," Tom said inexorably. "Make it stud. That's a fast game."

Burt Bush glanced wildly at DeSpain for advice, and the lawyer suddenly began to curse him with frantic impatience.

"Deal, you fool," the lawyer panted. "This man is loco. He'll kill me. Don't you savvy? He'll kill me. Deal the cards."

Burt Bush riffled the deck with hands that shook.

"Sky's the limit," Tom said. "Ten dollars ante to buy cards. Kick in, boys. I feel lucky tonight. I got a hunch that I'm goin' to win every hand. I aim to win enough money to buy me a new saddle string, an' to build a new house an' barn, an' to pay for the steers that some skunk slaughtered the other day. I expect to win. I'm a damned hard loser, gents. No tellin' what I'd do if the cards ran against me. Savvy?"

Burt Bush dealt a down card and an up card. Tom was low, but the others all checked the bet, and he pushed in three double eagles.

DeSpain looked at his comrades, and there was helpless, hunted fury in his eyes. He met the bet and the others complied.

Tom didn't glance at his cards. He kept pushing in gold money with each round. When the fifth card was dealt DeSpain threw his hand into the discard.

"You win," he said hollowly.

The sheriff and the two gunmen hastily followed his example, turning down their hands. Tom raked in the pot. His hand had been the lowest at the table, but they had dropped out, letting him win by default.

Tom counted his winnings. "That'll build me a new barn," he commented. "It's your deal next, DeSpain."

A few patrons had mastered their panic, and were lingering to watch. Among them were the two bench ranchers. These men had been gouged for years by DeSpain's organization. They waited with the fascination of snake-charmed birds as the weird poker game continued, watching this battle of nerve, expecting Lon DeSpain to call for a showdown.

But DeSpain, who boasted that he feared neither man nor devil, was face to face with something that he did fear. The gun-swift lawyer was afraid to die. That horror was engraved indelibly on his waxen face. He played without moving his eyes, from the ominous jar.

Tom forced the betting on the second pot, and again he won by default when DeSpain refused to show his hole card. Every spectator knew that the lawyer had held the winning hand, but the man preferred to lose rather than prolong this ordeal.

Tom gathered in the pot. "There's my house rebuilt," he said. "Now for the horses an' cattle that was slaughtered."

He won them in two hands that DeSpain refused to contest. Tom counted the stacks of gold money that lay in front of him; swept it all into his hat. "Three thousand," he nodded. "That'll clear up everything, an' leave a margin for that fake damage suit the hurdy-gurdy girl filed—provided you aim to go through with it, DeSpain."

• He pushed back his chair, picked up the

fruit jar, and arose. "You lack sand when you go up against a winnin' hand," he said contemptuously, looking at the lawyer. "You only play when the cards are stacked in your favor. Get out of this range, DeSpain. You're through in the Anvil country. An' that goes for you too, Sheriff. You're resignin' tomorrow—no, tonight! You're a disgrace to your badge. Both of you heed what I say. Clear out of this country."

"You fool," Lon DeSpain croaked. "I'll kill you on sight the next time we meet. You can't hide back of a jog of explosive every day."

"Explosives?" Tom said mockingly as he backed down the room towards the door, "So you really fell for that bluff? You're a bigger coward than I figured, DeSpain. Folks told me you was smart, but you're dumb as well as yellow. You didn't have the brains or the courage to call my bluff. Look!"

TOM lifted the jar high and dashed it on the floor. Glass shattered and flew across the room. There was no explosion. Only a greasy pool of oily fluid spread across the floor. Bystanders saw a few fragments of pumice rock lying there, which resembled the deadly nitro crystals.

"You can run a blaze on other men, DeSpain," Tom said scornfully. "But when one is run on you, you cave like a yellow hound pup!"

DeSpain was coming to his feet, screaming with fury, and going for his gun, but Tom had leaped through the swing doors into the outer darkness.

Tom ducked aside before the lawyer opened up. Slugs shattered the thin panels of the saloon door an instant later. Tom vaulted the rail, jerked the reins of his horse and hit the saddle in a flying leap.

"Get him," DeSpain was screaming in the saloon. "Come on, you fools. Blast him down before he gets out of town. He isn't armed."

DeSpain led the rush out of the Stampede, followed by Burt Bush and his gunmen. They began triggering.

Bullets snapped past Tom. He steadied himself in the saddle, lifting his gun from the saddle horn. Twisting around, he began shooting.

"Look out!" But Bush screeched. "He's got a cutter."

The warning came too late. One of the hired killers, standing at the sheriff's side, threw his arms wide, and fell with a blood-drowned cough. A second man twisted and sagged dazedly to his knees, clutching at a bullet-smashed shoulder as a slug tore through the muscles of Tom's upper left arm.

Lon DeSpain was the first to dive for cover, leaping away from the lights of the saloon windows. The others followed his example. When they recovered from their panic, Tom was out of gun range, speeding away into the darkness out of town.

The two ranchmen who had witnessed Lon DeSpain's humiliation, slipped away from the gunmen and citizens who were gathering in the street. There was shining hope and wonder in their eyes as they mounted and rode out of town.

One of them, a stoop-shouldered old timer, embittered by years of enforced servitude to DeSpain, spoke in an awed voice. "Lon DeSpain kin be beat!" He whispered it like a prayer. "Thet brown-eyed buckaroo proved it. He made DeSpain crawl. He showed that the rest of us have been spineless cowards. Let's ride an' wake up every damned rancher in this range. Tell 'em that Lon DeSpain ain't such an earth-shakin' maverick as we figured. It's time we was brought to our senses."

Tom dismounted a mile from town, tore his shirt into strips and bound the ragged, spurting bullet hole in his arm. The shock of the wound was making itself felt now. He groaned as he dragged himself back in the saddle. He was weak as a cat, and

feverish. The arm throbbed like a thousand toothaches. The bone had not been broken, but the .45 slug had torn through gristle and sinew. The injury needed skillful attention.

He had to have help now, and his dazed mind could think of only one person—Betty Leffler. He headed for the Leffler ranch to find her.

He was foggy with pain when he rode up to the unlighted spread as the first streak of dawn was lighting the sky. It was the girl who opened the door as he rapped. She was in her night-dress, and the promptness with which she rushed to his side, aroused and revived him.

"Tom," she gasped as she saw the blood.

She led him inside and lighted a lamp. Her father, clad in a long nightshirt and boots, appeared along with young Jim-Bob. The three of them began working on Tom.

CHAPTER

5

Proud to Die!

The mist of fever faded from Tom's mind under Betty Leffler's gentle, efficient ministrations. He started up suddenly, pushing the girl aside.

"I've got to get out o' here," he muttered thickly. "I shouldn't have come. My brain wasn't workin' right, or I wouldn't have bothered you folks. It's too risky for you."

He briefly told the story of the poker game and his flight from town. "DeSpain will pry up hell to ketch me an' pay me off," he concluded. "He's got to down me or quit. I made him eat crow in public an' that's the bitterest dose the boss of a wolf pack kin swallow. I showed that he was only human an' ~~that~~ he had his fear of death just like any other man. He had buffaloed everybody into thinkin' he was built of steel an' rock. Now that they savvy he's got his weak point, other men will hitch up their belts an' start fightin' back.

He's bound to try to hunt me down. If he learned that you folks gave me a helpin' hand he'd take out his grudge on you. I'll be pullin' out."

He turned toward the door, but Zeb Leffler and his daughter moved quickly, blocking his path.

"What kind o' rats do you think we air?" Zeb Leffler snapped. "You're in no shape to ride. You're stayin' here."

All of Zeb Leffler's mildness had vanished. The battle-light gleamed in his faded eyes.

"You're staying here," the girl echoed. "Where I—we—can look after you."

"But if DeSpain and his gunnies show up they'll build a smoke under you that—"

"Let 'em," Zeb Leffler snorted. "We kin build some smoke ourselves. They've badgered me around like I was a mangy pup. I've paid shakedown money to 'em every month, an' they've soaked me with fake lawsuits an' padded tax assessments till I wasn't more'n a *peon*, workin' to fatten DeSpain's bank account. From now on I pay 'em off with hot lead."

Young Jim-Bob, who had been peering from a window, piped up shrilly, "Yo're goin' to git a chance to back up your brag, Pop. They're a-comin'. Lon DeSpain an' his whole damned pack."

Tom leaped to the window. A score of riders were sweeping toward the ranch with DeSpain and Bush in the lead.

Tom turned to race for the kitchen door, but again Betty Leffler barred the way. He looked at her pleadingly, "I started it. I'm goin' out there to face it alone."

Her eyes were bright. "You've faced them alone long enough, Tom," she said. "This time we'll all stand together."

"They'll riddle this house," Tom argued. "They'll—"

Hoofs thundered in the dooryard. Zeb Leffler, his nightshirt flapping about his lean shanks, barred the doors, and jerked a rifle from the gun rack.

"Dig up all the shells you kin find,

Betty," he snapped. "Load that scatter-gun, Jim-Bob, an' guard the kitchen. Tom, you'n me'll take care o' the front of the house. Betty will reload fer us."

The girl and Jim-Bob were already racing around, dragging out arms. There were two rifles, three six-shooters and a shotgun among them, as they moved to their positions.

Burt Bush's voice sounded. "Open up, in the name of the law, Leffler. We know you're there. Show yourself. This is a sheriff's posse. We want Tom Gilroy. He killed a man in town last night. We know he's holed up in your house. There's blood on your door latch, an' his horse is in your corral."

"He's in here," Zeb Leffler responded. "If you want him, come an' get him. But come a-smokin'!"

Lon DeSpain took a hand. "You know what this means, don't you, Leffler?" he demanded. "You're resisting the law. This is a posse, under orders of the sheriff."

"I don't figure it was any crime to rub out one o' your snakes," Zeb Leffler snorted. "Clear out'n my ranch yard now. Posse or no posse, you ain't comin' in."

THERE was low-voiced muttering, and then Tom saw the riders scattering to surround the house. They left their horses and dove to cover.

A rifle twanged, and the bullet broke a window over Tom's head. Twenty guns opened up on that signal, and slugs battered the log walls.

Shards of glass flew across the room. Tom caught Betty Leffler's arm, and forced her, face down, in a corner. A slug twitched at his shirt as he moved. A ricochet from the fireplace showered him with stinging fragments of rock.

The gunfire slackened. "How do you feel about it now, Leffler?" DeSpain shouted. "That's only a taste of what we'll pour into that house, unless you surrender that fugitive at once."

Tom lifted his voice. "There's a girl an' a boy in here, DeSpain," he called. "I'm surrenderin' to you. I'm comin' out."

Zeb Leffler turned on him with a wolfish snarl. "If you make a move toward that door, I'll beef you with a gun bar!"

The rancher meant what he said. He looked at his son and daughter. "I love my children more'n anythin' else in the world," he added huskily. "But if they got to die here, there'll be no regret in my heart."

"Nor in mine," the girl said softly, and moved to Tom's side. "They'd riddle you the minute you showed, Tom."

"We'll whup 'em," young Jim-Bob put in from the kitchen. "Keep your shirt-tail tucked in, Tom. We ain't dead yit."

Tom looked at them, and the granite melted suddenly from his face. "An' I said once that there wasn't any fight left in this range," he said wonderingly. "I was wrong. Dead wrong."

He suddenly drew Betty into his arms, and kissed her on the lips. Then he lifted his head. "Turn loose your wolves, DeSpain," he shouted. "We're fightin' this out to a finish."

DeSpain swore savagely. "Give 'm hell, boys. Rip that house to pieces."

A storm of slugs beat upon the structure. Tom crouched below a window and knocked a loop-hole through the mud chinking. He ignored the pain of his wounded arm as he laid a bead on a head a hundred yards away. Slowly he squeezed the trigger. He saw the head bob violently, and caught a glimpse of a face frozen into the startled realization of death. It was Punch Tripp. Then the man's body fell back into the brush.

Zeb Leffler's rifle was in action also, and the girl, lying on her stomach, was using a six-shooter through a chink.

"Rush 'em," Lon DeSpain screeched. "Charge the house. Set fire to it. Drive 'em out in the open."

From every side gunmen arose, closing

in at a crouching run, shooting as they came. Jim-Bob's shotgun bellowed in the kitchen, and Tom heard a man scream. He worked the lever of his own rifle, knocking over two of them. Laying the empty gun aside, he snatched up a six-shooter.

But the odds were too great. DeSpain's men paid a heavy toll as they crossed the ranch yard, but more than a dozen lived to reach the walls of the house. A rifle muzzle was thrust through a window and aimed at Zeb Leffler. Tom, his six-shooter empty, knocked it aside and clubbed the attacker, sending him reeling back.

Betty Leffler was crouching below another window, swinging a clubbed rifle at every head that appeared. Jim-Bob, in the kitchen, was shattering his shotgun in a hand to hand fight with the invaders.

But there were too many windows to guard. Zeb Leffler fell, blood spurting from his side, as a six-shooter roared. Tom found himself with three windows to guard, and he was leaping back and forth, clubbing at head with a reversed rifle. He knew that this could not last. His strength was beginning to fail.

Suddenly he sensed a change. The pres-

sure at the windows abruptly seemed to subside, then halt. Outside, through the roaring pulse-beat in his ears, Tom heard the thunder of six-shooters again.

Betty Leffler uttered a wild scream of joy. "Look!"

Tom brushed sweat and a trickle of blood from his eyes. He stared at a swarm of riders who were sweeping into the ranch yard.

"The cattlemen!" the girl screamed.

The thunder of .45's reached a crescendo. Tom snatched an empty six-shooter from the floor, jammed shells into the chamber. He unbarred the door and raced out.

LON DE SPAIN'S men were breaking, fleeing from a determined skirmish line of yelling, whooping cattlemen. Dust drifted over the scene, split by the red flame of guns. Men were fighting, and dying.

Tom glimpsed Burt Bush reeling, with blood spurting from his chest, and saw him fall under a welter of plunging horses and fighting men. He caught a glimpse of Chick Stiles lying twisted in death.

Then DeSpain's conformed face loomed out of the fog of dust and gunsmoke, al-

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FIRE IN TUNNEL 9!

Exciting true story of railroad train trapped in blazing tunnel . . . told by chief dispatcher who handled the crisis . . . in May issue of

RAILROAD

MAGAZINE

The Magazine of Adventurous Railroading

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TRIGGER TIME

By DAVID CREWE



"Easy gents, I'm nervous
as hell tonight."

Two things waited for Joe Starter when he came out of jail—a new life, and a new way to lose it!

JOE STARTER came back to Turgis City at mid-afternoon. He rode down the middle of the street, the yellow dust spurting in small puffs from under the hoofs of his bay mare. In front of Purdy's Livery, he hesitated briefly. His horse having had nothing to eat but grass for the last week decided him, and he turned

into the livery and swung from the saddle.

To the gimp-legged hostler, he said, "Grain and a rub down." He pulled off his hat and sleeved his brow, the droplets of sweat making wet stripes on his new denim jumper.

The hostler, a stranger to Joe, looked at the new clothes, then at Joe's sunblackened face and the cropped hair. Joe grinned a little. "Yuma," he said. "Rock pile."

The hostler grabbed the reins of the bay and said hastily, "Grain and a rub." He led the horse into a stable.

Joe re-set his hat and turned into the street, and walked slowly to the small brick building that bore the sign, SHERIFF'S OFFICE AND JAIL. He went in.

Sheriff Bernie Everett came to his feet, his tough face showing a surprising warmth as he smiled. "Howdy, Joe. Been expecting you for a week."

Joe shook hands with the sheriff, smiling. "Had some loafing to do, Bernie. Took it easy. There's a hell of a lot of rock around Yuma. How's the ranch?"

"About the same, Joe. I leased it like you said. The BY outfit used it for a line camp." He turned to the safe in the corner and took out a thick envelope. He gave it to Joe. "There's what was left after taxes. Lease money and the fifty cows. About fifteen hundred dollars. It'll give you a start again." His grey eyes regarded Joe steadily. "Joe, you ain't got no notions about Minor have you?"

Joe shook his head. "Yuma ain't a place for foolish notions, Bernie. Five years there left me with one notion. I want to work my place. I want to cut me a ditch and tunnel to Stedman's Creek and irrigate the flats for alfalfa and bring me in some shorthorn cows." He grinned wryly. "I would like to entertain the notion of Minor as a father-in-law, Bernie, but I guess that's out under the circumstances."

Everett's tough face settled into his usual grimness. "Ollie Wiper is hard

after Lin Minor," he said. "In fact the engagement is sort of unofficial, but Ollie let it out. Lin hasn't said." He looked at Joe carefully. "There's a lot of talk, Joe. A lot of folks think you'll ride in with blood in your eye for Gar Minor. Be careful, son."

Joe said, "I lifted Minor's payroll, Bernie, and stole a few of his cows. I paid the price the law demanded. I'm ready to let it go at that. I figure to be too busy digging ditches and tunnels to be bothered by what folks think." His sunburned face showed a faint regret. He sighed. "I guess I about ruined everything in my dumb way. I was mad at Minor for throwing me off the place and forbidding me to see Lin. Maybe I could have taken that if he hadn't had me beaten by Kroner and Whitey. I've wondered about that some. It didn't seem much like Minor. He might have had me shot or hung, but beaten—"

"It's over now, Joe," Bernie cut in, and his face had gone tight. "Forget it, son. If you need help out there, let me know. I got a few dollars saved up you can use."

Joe nodded. "Thanks, Bernie. I'll remember that." He turned toward the door.

"Oh, here, Joe," Bernie said and got up to take a belt with holstered gun from the rack. "Here's your gun, you might need to shoot a snake."

JOE TOOK the gunbelt, hefting it, but made no move to buckle it on. He turned to the door again, then stopped suddenly, staring.

Lin Minor stood in the door, her blue eyes dark with emotion, and her breast rose and fell rapidly. "Joe," she said. "Oh, Joe. . . ."

Joe moved quickly, and Lin came into his arms with a cry. He held her tightly; then her lips were warm and alive and hungry against his own. Neither of them heard Everett's soft step as he moved back into the cell block.

After a minute, Lin said, "Joe, you're not . . . you haven't got any ideas about Dad?"

Joe kissed her again, his hand moving over her soft coppery hair. "No, Lin. That's over and done far as I'm concerned. I'm heading for my place, and I aim to be mighty busy there. Maybe after a while people will sort of forget and we can get married. Would you be willing to marry a jailbird, Lin?"

"Hush, Joe." She put a finger to his lips. "Don't talk like that. We'll be together, and that is all that counts. I'll help you out there. We'll do it together. I'm twenty-two now, and Dad can't stop me." She pulled his head down and kissed him again, and he answered the pressure of her lips with all the accumulated hunger of five years.

He stood there in the door a long time, looking down the street after her, finally he turned when Bernie said, "Joe."

"She still loves me, Bernie," Joe said dreamily. "I'm a lucky man."

"Maybe," Bernie said. His face was tight and he spoke reluctantly. "Joe, Ollie wants Lin, and he aims to have her. I know that you and Ollie was pretty good friends. Maybe, you done a few things together before he went to work for Minor and you went on your own. He's not the same, Joe. Did you ever wonder if it might not have been Minor who had you beaten? Kroner and Whitey are Ollie's partners. You want to watch yourself, boy. I hate to say it, me being the sheriff, but I don't want you back in Yuma either—or hung."

Joe grinned. "Hell, Bernie, Ollie was always mostly bluff. I ain't got no worries if he's all I have to worry about!"

As he stepped out to the board walk, Bernie said softly, "Don't be too sure about that, Joe."

Joe called back, "Keep an eye on that dust cloud out on Stedman's Flats, Bernie. That'll be me digging a ditch!"

Joe bought a sack of groceries and carried them to the livery. He was lashing them behind the saddle when two men entered the barn behind him.

A voice said behind Joe, "You smell anything, Whitey?"

"Yeah," Whitey said. "Smells like a jailbird. Stinks real bad."

Joe turned to face the pair. They stood five feet away, grinning at him, but their eyes were alert. Whitey, lean and poised with his long, light hair, and Kroner, solid, heavy faced with cold yellow eyes.

"Now that you have been ugly to teacher," Joe said, "you can run along and play with the other kids."

Kroner's eyes flared, and Whitey's lips thinned out. "Don't hang around this county, Starter," Whitey said. "You won't be told again."

"It'll be bad," Kroner said. "Worse than now."

"It's bad now, huh?" Joe said.

"Show him how bad, Kroner," Whitey said.

Kroner leaped at Joe, huge fists swinging. Whitey lifted a gun, holding it slanted upward ready to chop down. Joe lunged aside and forward, and his fist went solidly against the unyielding hardness of Kroner's belly. In Joe was an old and deep-rooted hatred for these two who had beaten him badly once, left him nearly dead.

Kroner's fist skinned a patch of skin off his jaw as it passed, and the man merely grunted a little as Joe hit him. Joe hit him again, with his other fist, bringing it over in a hooking blow to smash Kroner's nose. Kroner bawled with pain then, and lashed out at Joe with a boot. The boot hit Joe on the hip as he twisted, numbing his leg, and it slowed him enough to allow Kroner to leap at him, fist driving viciously. A blow staggered Joe as it smacked his chin, and another numbed the entire side of his head. He drove a kick at Kroner, blindly, furiously. It landed on Kroner's knee, and the man staggered backward,

snarling curses. Whitey leaped in with his gun, and the barrel slammed Joe across the head. Joe went down.

Kroner leaped at Joe, boots driving, and Joe had barely enough senses left to fold over his stomach, protecting his face and belly with arms and legs. Dimly, he heard a voice shouting and the blows ceased.

"Get the hell out of here! Get back to the ranch. Who told you to beat a man to death?" It was Ollie Wiper, Minor's foreman.

"Sure, boss," Whitey said. "We didn't like his looks."

"We were changing his looks to suit us," Kroner said.

"Beat it," Ollie Wiper said.

Joe struggled to sit up, and saw Kroner and Whitey leaving the barn. The hostler was hovering over him then, and Wiper said, "I'll see after him, Ben, go on about your business." The hostler left hastily. Wiper said, "You all right now, Joe?"

"Yeah," Joe said. "I'm all right."

"Listen, Joe," Wiper said hurriedly and softly, "I'm giving you a tip. I just come in to report rustling on the ranch. Twenty-five head were taken last week from the Clincher Meadows. Minor is going to raise hell, and he's going to think of you first, Joe. You're been out of the pen two weeks, and it don't take but a week of easy riding from here to Yuma. It'll look bad for you, Joe, and Minor would fire me if he knew I mentioned it to you. You can take it for what it's worth. I'll see you, Joe." He stood up and left quickly, turning out of the barn toward the Minor town house as Joe stared after him.

Joe got to his feet and stood unsteadily for a minute until his head cleared a little. He climbed onto his horse and rode out of the barn and toward his place on Stedman's Flats. As he rode he began to get the full implication of what Ollie had said.

It did look bad, damn bad. He'd loafed for a full week in the Owlhorns, just lying on his back looking at the sky and resting. But he couldn't prove it. He *could* have ridden in, stolen the steers. Joe cursed and thought of Ollie Wiper and cursed again. Had something like this been what Bernie was hinting at?

JOE came to the rim of the flats at sundown, and sat his saddle while he made and lighted a smoke. He looked down at the distant buildings that were his ranch and some of the bitterness eased out of him. This was home. This was the place he planned to bring his wife, raise his family. Lin, Mrs. Joe Starter. Yonder, beyond the flats where they jumbled into the malpais, was Stedman's Creek. Joe aimed to bring his water from there, via tunnel and ditch to irrigate the flats. Two hundred acres of alfalfa. Hay for those white-faced cows he aimed to bring from back east.

It would be hard, back-breaking work, but miners sunk shafts into hills, and so could Joe Starter. Only he'd go through the hill. There would be a hundred yards of tunnel or better beside the ditch and cuts. It'd take maybe two years, but it would be worth it, and he'd do it. For Lin and the family he aimed to have. . . .

From town came the murmur of a running horse. Joe listened for a moment, then undid the sack of groceries, took out the gun and belt. He refastened the sack and belted on the gun, then drew the gun and filled the chambers with shells. He set it back in the holster, hearing the increasing sound of the horse. He reined his own mount off the trail behind a nest of brush-grown boulders.

The rider came on, topped the ridge and started with unabated speed down toward the flats, a slender rider with the twilight soft on her coppery hair.

"Lin!" Joe shouted shoving his mount after her. "Hey, Lin!"

She hauled her blowing horse to a stop

and turned it as Joe came up beside her. "Lin, what in the world—"

"Joe, you've got to run!" she burst out. "Daddy is coming with half a dozen men, swearing he'll hang you! Bernie is with him, but he won't be able to control him. You've got to run, Joe. He says you stole twenty-five steers. Please, Joe, don't try to fight, and maybe . . . kill him. . . ."

"I won't hurt him, Lin," he said, "if I can help it. But I ain't going back to jail, and I don't figure to be hung." His voice was suddenly hard and angry. "This is a damn frame, Lin. I didn't steal no cows, but I can't prove it either."

"What will you do, Joe? They'll be here quickly now."

"It looks," he said grimly, "as if I'll have to hunt me some steers and a skunk—"

"Joe! Listen!"

He heard it, the distant sound of running horses. He said quickly, "Lin, get out of sight till they pass, then go back to town. Don't worry about me, it ain't your dad that I aim to have trouble with. I got some riding to do."

"What—"

But he was gone, shoving his horse head-down the trail to the flats. He would leave the posse a dust trail, and the darkness would be thick by the time he crossed the flats. He'd shake them there in the malpais. Then he would pay Max Hotner a visit over at Bend. Max, with a little persuasion might be able to tell him a few things. Max liked his cattle cheap, and, if they were brought at night, all the better. From prison gossip, Joe knew that Max was still in business.

He arrived in Bend shortly past midnight on a dead beat horse. He left the animal in the brush along the river and walked on to the stock pens. Max had his little shack there where he lived and carried on his cow buying business. There was a light in the shack, and Joe walked boldly toward it, knowing there would be a guard and that this would bring him out.

It did. "Hold up there, feller," a voice said from the shack's shadow. Joe stopped, and the man said, "What you want?"

"Want to see Max," Joe said. He kept his hand carefully away from his gun. "About some cows."

"I never seen you before."

"Joe Starter. Max knows me. I sold him cows before. Five years ago in fact. Been to Yuma."

The man thought that over a moment, then he rapped on the wall of the shack. "Hey, Max, you know a man named Joe Starter? Says he's been to Yuma."

"I know Joe," Max Hotner's voice came faintly. "Send him in, Ned."

Ned jerked his head. "Go on in, feller, careful like."

He moved away from the wall and stood there with his hand on his gun butt as Joe moved past him. Joe turned then, whipping his clinched fist hard against the man's jaw. Ned sprawled with a grunt, and Joe was on him instantly, his gun barrel whipping down. Ned went limp. Joe opened the door and stepped inside.

MAX HOTNER, a wiry little man with small black eyes, was half out of his chair, his hand out of sight under his coat. Joe said, "Hands on the table, Max. You know how I can shoot." He wagged his gun barrel.

Max removed his hand from his coat and laid both flat on the table, his little eyes darting swiftly. "I laid Ned out," Joe said. "I wanted us to have privacy for our little talk."

"What's this, Joe? What you got it in for me about? Ain't I always treated you right?"

"For money," Joe said softly, "you'd treat anybody any way, Max. You'd cut your brother's throat for a dime, and I know it. But what I want is information. I need to be sure about a couple of things, and you can tell me, Max. You will too."

Max's little eyes were uneasy. He knew

Joe when he was wild and as tough as he was wild. "Joe, I ain't in business no more, except straight. I can't help you about no night run cattle."

"These steers," Joe said, "were brought last week. Twenty-five steers with Minor's brand. Who brought them, Max?"

"Not me, Joe, I don't know nothing about them. I ain't handled none of Minor's cows since you was sent up. I'm strictly level—"

Joe hit him with the gun barrel, bringing the weapon sideways to slap Max alongside the head. "Speak right up, Max."

Max blinked his eyes for a moment, bracing against the table with his hands. His eyes steadied, and his glare was murderous. "I'll remember this, Joe."

Joe hit him again, and this time Max went to the floor. Joe moved around the table and hauled the crooked cow buyer to his feet. He slapped him first on one side of the head, then on the other. Max's eyes crossed, and he would have fallen if Joe hadn't held him. Joe shoved him in the chair and removed the gun from the shoulder holster and threw it through the door.

"You know me, Max," Joe said. "I got all night, and I'll be slapping you at sun-up." He suddenly hauled the little man up and glared into the little eyes. "Damn you for a crook and a sneak, Max. You took those steers and you know why too. Speak up before I beat you to death!" He slammed him back into the chair.

There was fear in the little eyes now. "All right, Joe, all right. Kroner and Whitey brought them. And Ollie Wiper. He just wanted me to hold them for awhile up in Squaw Park. That's the truth, Joe, I didn't know why he wanted it that way. He paid me a hundred dollars to hold them."

"That's better," Joe said. "You leave them steers right there, Max. Leave the sign too, for Bernie Everett to see. I ain't going back to Yuma for stealing them, or be hung either. You doctor that sign or

try any funny business, Max, and you got Joe Starter's promise to hunt you down and put a bullet in your guts. Hear me, Max?"

"Yeah, yeah, I hear you." Max said.

"Bernie can't prove it was you there," Joe said. "But he can see it wasn't me. That's what I want, that's the price of your scalp, Max."

"All right, Joe, all right."

Joe went back to the river and mounted his horse. He hated to ride the exhausted animal, but he wanted to get clear of Bend. Five miles out of town he staked the horse in a small clearing in the brush and slept himself as the eastern sky began to show the first sign of dawn.

He slept all day, not wanting the risk riding about in the light, and with sundown, he was riding again, for Turgis City. Bernie Everett would listen to his story, and he would look into it, but Joe would have to hand over his gun first, and do his waiting in jail. But the wait would be short, Bernie was a thorough officer, and he could read the sign he'd find. . . .

Joe came into Turgis City about ten o'clock, but he didn't ride in to the sheriff's office. He hauled up at the edge of town and sat there in the darkness watching the unusual amount of activity. The Minor house was ablaze with lights, and men and women milled about the place. Other men and horses were scattered over the street and a clump of men gathered before the jail. Something was up.

Joe dismounted. He'd maybe better wait to ride in, try to get a line on what was going on. He led the horse to a small patch, fenced to hold the Widow Ewings horses for her buggy. Nobody would notice his own horse there for awhile. He moved cautiously toward the jail.

He came as close in as he dared, remaining beyond the last reaching light, 'til he was close enough to hear the hum of talk and catch a word occasionally. Then everybody turned to watch the group of riders coming down the street; Bernie Everett

with Ollie Wiper, Kroner and Whitey, and three other men. Joe watched the posse pull up before the jail with growing uneasiness.

A man called to Everett, "You see anything of the murdering scut, sheriff?" Everett shook his head and swung off his horse. Others followed suit, all except Ollie Wiper who remained in the saddle. A man said, "We'll get him and we'll stretch Joe Starter's neck on a limb this time! A damn bushwhacker, shooting people from the dark in their own house!"

Ollie asked, "Is Minor dead yet?"

"Nope," a voice said, "Doc from Medicine Bow just got there awhile ago. Said Minor ought to pull through."

"Reckon I'll ride up there a minute, Bernie," Ollie said. He turned his horse toward the Minor house.

Everett called after him. "Be down to the Turgis saloon in an hour, Wiper. We'll figure this thing out, and I'll need all your cowboys to help throw up blocks." Ollie rode on with a lift of his hand, and Joe faded back into the darkness well beyond the jail.

HE SQUATTED in the darkness there, and the rage was a black and furious pulse inside him. Minor had been shot, bushed from the darkness. And Joe Starter was being blamed for it. Joe sent a black glance after Ollie where the man was dismounting before the Minor house.

Ollie was sewing him up tighter and tighter. He would be hanged now or sent up for life. Ollie would have the Minor ranch—and Lin.

"Not this easy, Ollie," Joe said through his teeth. "You'll be dead. You'll be as dead as a forty-four bullet can make you!"

But as the fury eased off, Joe's coolness returned. To breast Ollie and kill him would avail him little. It would make it worse. There would be two killings charged against him. He needed to talk to Everett, put this up to him. There were two witnesses to say that Joe Starter had been in Bend

last night, thirty miles away from the scene of the shooting.

Joe smiled wryly. Max Hotner and his man, Ned, would likely see Joe Starter in hell before they would admit he'd been there. Apparently he was caught fast.

There would be some good men at that meeting Bernie had called. He'd seen the Swindell brothers at the jail, and old man Jake and Ben Lovelace. Ollie would be there too, and his two bully boys, Krone and Whitey. Joe got to his feet; he'd make his play there, at the meeting, and, if he made it good enough, Bernie could be depended upon to make Hotner talk later, and there was a possibility that he could shake Ollie. Ollie, if Joe remembered right, had never been too good a man in a pinch. He might help convince Bernie by his actions.

Joe let himself into the back door of the saloon, and then into the store-room at the end of the hall next to the back door. Up the short hall were other small rooms for private games, and next to the curtains that cut the hall off from the main barroom, was the banquet room. There were held any important meetings. Joe hunkered down against a pile of empty barrels to wait.

It seemed to Joe that he had been waiting hours before he heard the sound of many boots passing through the barroom. The curtains were shoved aside and men came into the hallway and into the banquet room. Through the cracked door of the store room, Joe saw that Ollie Wiper, Kroner, and Whitey were among them.

When they were all inside, a bartender came with bottles and glasses, left them in the room, and went out again, closing the curtains behind him. Drawing his gun, Joe left the store room and moved up the hall to the banquet room. He turned the knob, shoved the door open, stepped inside and backed against the door.

A dozen men stared at him, and Joe said bluntly, "Easy, gents, I'm nervous as hell tonight, and the first man to move is a dead man." A dozen pairs of eyes looked at the

cocked .44 in his hand and no one moved. Joe said, "Bernie, let me have my say and then you can have my gun. All right?"

Bernie Everett's face had begun to get red, but at Joe's words some of the growing tension seemed to run out of him. He growled, "I'm not in the habit of bargaining with criminals, but have your say, Joe. You must have something to say, or you're a damn fool!"

"Maybe both," Joe said. "I just found out awhile ago that Minor had been shot. I didn't shoot him. I was in Bend last night. Max Hotner and his man Ned can tell you. They won't like to admit it, but you can get it out of them, Bernie. I treated Max a little rough and Ned too. I found out who brought those steers of Minor's to him. He's holding them in Squaw Park. For a hundred dollars, to be returned later—the steers, that is."

HE HAD their attention now. Many showed disbelief, but others listened carefully. Ollie Wiper's smooth face whitened a little, and Whitey was very still. Kroner was shifting nervously. Bernie was looking at them.

Joe said, "That's right, Bernie. Ollie, Kroner, and Whitey done it. Ollie wants Lin Minor, and the ranch to go with her. He was afraid I might get out of the cow stealing, so he shot Minor to make sure I hanged or was sent up for life!"

"That's a damned lie!" Ollie shouted. "Bernie, you going to sit there and let a damned jailbird slander my character? He's guilty and we all know it. We'll hang him. Right now!"

"Maybe the law will," Everett said evenly. "But if he's telling the truth we'll know it. It ain't rained a drop since those steers were stolen. Now we know where they are, there'll be tracks. Tracks match tracks from the same horse and I'll want to see your horses. I'll also see that Max Hotner does some talking. I been wanting something on that crook. He'll talk all right!"

Joe hadn't taken his eyes off the three Minor men, and he saw the sudden exchange of glances, the realization that once Everett was on a trail he stayed on it.

Ollie's shrug was tight. "Suit yourself, Bernie, but you're a fool," he said. He shoved his gun over the table's edge and fired at Joe.

"Whitey! Kroner!" Ollie bawled.

Joe leaped with Ollie's first move and the bullet splintered into the door beside him, then Joe fired but had to tilt his gun to avoid hitting old Jake. Men yelled and scrambled for safety and someone slapped out the lamp, plunging the room into darkness.

Instantly, Joe jerked open the door and went into the hall. He ripped the curtains down, allowing light to spill into the hall from the barroom as men boiled from the door of the banquet room.

Kroner's bulk plowed through the doorway with Whitey in his wake. Kroner saw Joe flattened against the wall and fired, his lead biting at Joe's hip. Joe fired and Kroner dropped his gun, heeling backward into Whitey and spoiling the lean gunman's aim as he blasted two shots at Joe. Kroner clamped his hands to his side and disappeared back into the room. Whitey leaped forward, his guns hammering, and Ollie was there then, his own gun roaring. Joe went sideways and fired as he hit the floor. He shot Whitey twice and saw the gunman collapse as Ollie leaped over him and plunged for the rear door.

Joe snapped a shot at Ollie and the man bawled and leaped sideways into the store room. Joe grabbed Kroner's fallen gun to replace his empty one and crawled rapidly for the store room. He came to his feet and lunged inside. Ollie's gun bellowed point-blank at him and Joe felt the shock of the lead in his left arm that numbed it.

Joe snapped a shot at Ollie's position in the corner, but he was off balance and fell against the stack of barrels. The barrels

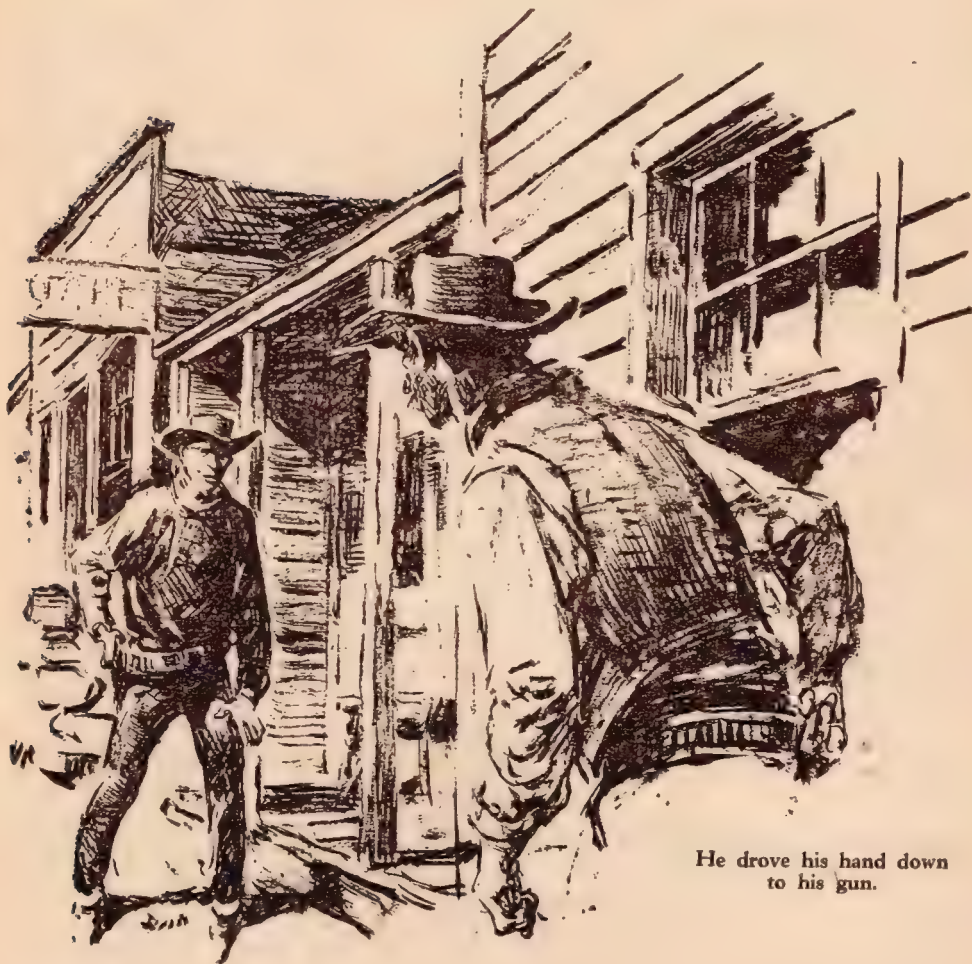
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LAW OF THE GUNBORN



By C. WILLIAM
HARRISON

*There is a fine line dividing the gunslick from the gunman,
and Amy Devore had to learn to walk it before she could
decide which gun would be hers!*



He drove his hand down
to his gun.

IN THE mid-afternoon, at this season of the year, the wind always changed to the south and came rolling up, hot and dusty, out of the desert.

To Wes McNeen, this was the worst time of day. A Montana man like him was forever marked by the cool winds of the high-country and the scent of the mountain water racing in its channel across a lush range. He didn't think he would ever

get Montana out of his mind. He knew for a certainty that he did not want to, at least not so long as he had to stay holed up in this lost corner of nowhere. His memory of Montana's big sky and green graze was about all he had left to carry him on.

He sat in the wall-propped chair, a tall angular man thinned down by the relentless heat of the desert sun. At this hour of day there was only a thin, thready flow of life

in this town—Twenty-Mile. A few dusty ponies dozed at the tie-rails in front of the saloon. An hour ago old Adolph Gepner had lugged the side of beef in from his outdoor meat hook, and since then there had been no sign of activity at the store. Sheriff Letham, by nature a lethargic man, was napping at his desk in the jail office.

The liver-colored hound pup that had adopted Wes McNeen for the afternoon rose disjointedly from the rough planks of the porch floor, moved away from the shaft of sunlight leaking through a crack in the board awning, and flopped down on the floor again, its tongue hanging red and moist from the side of its jaw. McNeen reached down and idly scratched the pup's silken ears.

Footsteps crossed the bare floor of the hotel's lobby, sounding loud against the afternoon's fevered silence. Wes McNeen's nerves went taut, and he swung his attention to the hotel's open doorway. Amy Devore came out onto the porch, followed by Glen Creasey. He nodded to them and relaxed, watching with mild interest as they turned toward him.

Creasey grinned at the girl, and said, "I'll bet a dollar there's not a man in town who could light-foot up behind Wes without being seen."

Amy paused at the empty chair beside McNeen, a troubled smile reflected in her amber eyes.

McNeen said quietly, "In a town like this, you could say the same thing about every other man you meet."

Glen Creasey nodded amiably. "That's a fact, now. Twenty-Mile has always collected more than its share of ridge-runners."

Pressure tightened the edges of McNeen's mouth, and he saw the smile go out of Amy's eyes.

"Some day," she said distinctly, "you're going to talk too quick to the wrong man, Glen."

Creasey's laugh was free and easy. He

was a slim young man with finely chiseled features and eyes that looked boldly out at the world with a glint of cheerful derision.

"Now, Amy. Wes knows I didn't mean anything personal."

McNeen shrugged.

The girl pulled the chair around and sat down. She was quite tall, and with softly rounded shoulders and breasts. The heat of the day had given her face a kind of golden glow, and a rebellious ringlet of hair lay dark and moist against her forehead. She looked down at the liver-colored pup, and raised a smile to McNeen.

"A new friend, Wes?"

"An old and trusted one, Amy. His name is Curly Bill."

"Named after that gunfighter down at Tombstone?"

"This one is tough, too," McNeen said, and grinned. "You ought to see him tie into a troublesome flea."

THERE would have been an easy pleasure to this moment but for Glen Creasey. Creasey was a man constantly nagged by restlessness, a quick, vital man. Energy flowed through him in strong, pushing currents, keeping him always on his feet, his eyes in movement, his thoughts and emotions fluid in the lines of his face. Leaning back against the porch rail, he dug a small chunk of crusty white substance out of his pocket and tossed it into the air. He caught it instantly with a quick sweep of his slim hand, watching McNeen.

"Know what this stuff is, Wes?"

"You told me you thought it was borax."

Creasey's grin was swift, sharp. "And that's exactly what it is. Cottonball borax, Wes. Amy and I gave it the test a while ago. It's cottonball borax, all right. We fired it, and it burned green."

McNeen looked at Amy, and she nodded. He shrugged.

"In case you don't know it," Creasey said a little irritably, "this stuff is worth money."

"So?"

"Lordamighty, man! Don't you even care?"

McNeen smiled. "Money won't buy everything in this world, Glen."

"What it won't buy," said Creasey with a short and brittle laugh, "I can get along well enough without. How about it, Wes—do you think you could go back to the place where you found this stuff?"

"I reckon." It had been a year or more ago that the two men dogging his trail had driven him down into that murderous pocket of desert, a gaunt, stark land of spiny hills and marled arroyos. He would never be able to forget that basin again. He had almost died there.

"Tell me about it, man!" Creasy said insistently. "How far away is the place? How much of this stuff did you see there?"

McNeen grinned slowly. "Thirty miles, and three-four hundred acres, more or less."

Creasey shoved restlessly away from the railing, a sheen of sweat on his face. "That much, Wes? Wake up, man, and have a look at what you've found. This stuff is worth a small fortune if we handle it right."

McNeen looked up from his chair, mildly amused. "We?"

"Yes, we—you and me. You found the stuff, but I tipped you off what it was. You'd have carried it around in your gear and then chucked it away some day without ever knowing what you had. I'm the one who set you straight about it, and that ought to cut me in for a partnership."

McNeen said gently, "Suits me, Glen." He rummaged the makings out of his pocket and slowly tapered a cigarette. He scratched a sulphur match into flame, and got his smoke going. "How do you figure this new partnership of ours, Glen?"

"Sixty percent your way, and forty for me. You'll need me to help you lay out the lines and file the claims. After that, we can decide whether to work the stuff ourselves, or sell out to the Pacific Coast company.

over at Death Valley. I hear talk that Borax Smith—"

McNeen broke in gently. "You're running away with yourself," he said, and felt the impact of Creasey's narrowed eyes. He squinted against the sun-glare of the street, his voice slow and mild as he spoke.

"You gave me the controlling interest in this partnership, Glen. Remember?"

"Well?"

McNeen smiled. "So we won't be making any deals. The borax stays where it is."

An incredulous look spread across Creasey's face, and he stared narrowly down at the man in the chair.

"Damn it, man!"

"Lady present, Glen," said McNeen softly.

Creasey wheeled angrily and tramped to the end of the porch. He swung instantly back, and his voice slapped at McNeen with a harsh spitefulness.

"What's wrong with you, man! Are you still afraid of those men who chased you out of Montana? Is that it? You afraid they might read about a deal in the papers, and pick up your trail again?"

McNeen took a slow, even breath. "Have you been poking around in my gear, Glen?" he asked gently.

Creasey stood tall and lean against the flaring sunlight, his stare hot now, and bitter. His hand was on his low-laced gun, and blue metal was in his eyes.

Amy said, quick and sharp, "It's not for you to decide, Glen."

But he didn't seem to hear her. His temper built up hot and wild in his smoke-blue eyes, and then he said, "For five years I've jumped from town to town hunting for a break. And when I get it finally, what do I find? I'm tied up by a poor scared damn fool who can't see where he is for all the running he's doing."

He made a savage, slicing gesture with one hand, and wheeled away with a gusty flare of anger. He went down the steps and out into the dust of the street in hard,

plunging strides, angling sharply toward the Keg House saloon.

MCNEEN and the girl sat in the meager shade cast by the hotel's wooden awning. McNeen knew that Glen Creasey would get himself drunk and that there would probably be a fight. It was the usual pattern in a town where heat wore tempers thin, and the only law was a fat old man who wore a badge and seldom made an effort to live up to it. McNeen thought: if I can keep the kid away from his gun, he'll be all right.

But he had seen a different kind of temper whip up in Glen Creasey's eyes this time—the brittle wildness and naked fury that could make a man a killer. McNeen had known this wildness and fury himself.

"You shouldn't have led him on the way you did, Wes," the girl said quickly.

"Didn't mean to, Amy."

"He thought you were serious about the partnership," the girl said. "That's what cut him so deep. You've got to see his side of it, Wes. Glen is all right. A little too ambitious for money, maybe."

"And too hot-headed. 'It's a bad combination, Amy, a quick temper and an oversized ambition.'" McNeen was silent for a moment. Then he said, "I ought to know."

He felt the girl's eyes on him, and held his own moody gaze on the street and its flanking rows of front-flared buildings. A dust-devil went spinning past Sherm Crawford's apothecary, and heat flowed across the hotel porch like the breath from an open oven. McNeen took off his hat and ran fingers through his sweat-dampened hair. The hat-shaded whiteness of his forehead was a startling contrast to the deep, ruddy tan of his face. He put his hat on again and said, "You love him, Amy?"

"I—I don't know."

He looked at her then, and saw the troubled frown clouding her eyes. A pulse was beating strong and steady in the soft hollow of her throat, and for a single swift, aching

moment McNeen saw the face of another girl rise up in his mind, mocking him with her smile—and then, as he had so many other times this past year, he rigidly closed a door in his mind against that girl.

He said a little thinly, "You ought to make up your mind about him, one way or the other. If you love him, you can help him; if you don't love him, you'll only hurt him. Glen is pushing himself out on a ragged edge, Amy. He'll fall off, if he's not careful."

He waited for the girl to speak, and when she did not he said, "Glen spends too much time practicing with that gun he packs day in and out."

He detected a censoring coolness in Amy's small smile. "I hear talk about you being a lot better than average with a gun. It must have taken you a lot of practice to get that way."

"Yes," McNeen murmured. "A lot of practice. A man can get foolish notions about some things. He can practice and get too good with the wrong kind of tools. That's what I'm trying to tell you about Glen."

Her frown deepened, and she watched him in her direct, unswerving way as she spoke. "A man has to be able to protect himself."

"There's a difference, Amy. A mighty big difference that you don't always see until it's too late."

The girl raised her head a little, watching him narrowly. She was suddenly, uncontrollably impatient with him.

"Who do you think you are, Wes McNeen, a sort of god who can ride into a strange town and point out the mistakes other people are making, but never see your own? Are you so proud and good that you can say you never once took the wrong turn in a trail?"

"Amy—"

"You discovered a rich borax claim out in the desert," she said bitterly. "It was Glen who showed you what you have. He

had a right to expect an interest in that borax. He's young and ambitious, and you carried him along as if everything he wants out of life is a kind of joke."

She rose suddenly out of her chair and stood over him, taut and pale.

"Did you think you could keep any secrets from this town, Wes McNeen?" she cried out. "Twenty-Mile is a small place, and the people in it are small enough to be curious about a stranger. I'm one of those people, and I was curious about you. Curious enough, if you want the truth, to go through your things one day when I was cleaning up your room.

"I saw that Montana newspaper you brought here with you. I read about the man you killed up there in a fight over a girl. And I learned about the two brothers of that man who chased you out of Montana and kept hunting you until they thought you died out there in the desert a year ago."

McNeen held his eyes on the girl, while his resentful anger rose up in him, broke, and fell away into weary emptiness.

"You're not quite the god you set yourself up to be, Wes McNeen. I read enough in that paper to know that you are a little less than perfect, and I'm getting tired of hearing you talk about the mistakes Glen Creasey might happen to make with his own life."

She was gone then, rushing blindly past him into the hotel. McNeen sat motionless in his chair. He remembered the girl in Montana who had flirted carelessly with the bloated pride of two men, and he remembered the way Roy Templin's eyes had cried out in agonized horror as he sagged down to the dust of the street, clutching at the place where McNeen's bullet had torn through his body.

You ride a long mile one day, he thought, and when you look back at it you see, too late, that it was a raw, red mile, with death at the end of it and the echo of its swift violence forever branded into your mind.

CHAPTER

2

Gunman's Town

McNeen saw the two men as they came down out of the stark, ridged hills north of town, riding mounts that were dusty and jaded from long traveling. They pointed their horses up the street at a slow, patient walk, wearing guns laced low.

"Are they the ones?" Amy asked.

"They're the ones," McNeen said.

They stood in the shadowed doorway of the hotel, McNeen and the girl, watching the two riders angle in to the Keg House hitch rail and dismount.

Amy said, "Ever since Dad died and left me this hotel I've watched killers ride into this town. You get so you can recognize the bad ones without a second glance. Those men are easy enough to read."

McNeen nodded. Ed and Clint Templin—and he knew their younger brother would have ridden the same harsh trail. Yet knowing that did not make Roy's death any easier for him to live with.

"What are you going to do Wes?"

He turned and looked at the girl beside him. "I don't know yet."

She touched his arm urgently. "I can get a horse for you. I'll bring it around back of the hotel. There's still time, Wes."

He smiled wryly. "A month ago you gave me a rawhiding for running away from that Montana trouble."

The girl made a distracted motion with her hand. "I'm sorry about that."

He shrugged.

"I didn't realize the kind of men these Templins are, Wes. I do now. The one you fought must have been the same kind as his brothers."

"On his way," McNeen said, "and getting there fast."

"You've got to leave here while you've still got time," Amy said.

He shook his head. "Running away won't settle anything," he said.

He understood that now, and he realized he must have known it a year and more ago. A man made his mark on the trail, and someday, somewhere, he had to account for it. A man could never run far enough to escape.

"I saw Roy Templin die with my bullet in him, and there was something in his eyes I'll never forget. He wasn't hating me then. He was asking me to help him, Amy, but I couldn't help him; he was asking me why we had fought and why I had killed him, and there was nothing I could say to answer him."

He heard Amy's softly crying voice. "Wes—you're not so hard and tough at all!"

"I've tried to be. It might have helped."

She stood close to him, her hands pressed against his. "It's not right for you to keep punishing yourself for what you couldn't have prevented."

"Whatever a man does in this world, good or bad, he has to pay for."

"But those men are killers. What good would it do to let them shoot you down. Listen to me, Wes!"

"I can't spend the rest of my life running."

"But there's still time!"

"I can't run away from what's inside me, Amy. I know, because I've tried."

Glen Creasey came out of the Keg House in long, hurried strides, his boot heels pounding hard and sharp on the plank walk. A fine glow of perspiration was on his thin face as he came into the hotel lobby. He saw McNeen and instantly halted.

"Couple of old friends of yours just got in town," he said grinning sardonically. "But I reckon I'm not telling you anything you don't know."

McNeen studied the man soberly. "You the one who sent for them, Glen?"

Creasey's laugh was a dry, mocking sound. "That's one for you to figure out."

Amy cried out in a soft, aching tone. "Glen— oh, Glen!"

CREASEY'S grin was a thing of cold, taunting malice. "This puts you in kind of a bind, McNeen. There's two of them, and they're already talking plain down there in the Keg House about having their guns notched for you. Two of them and only one of you, which will make you easy meat when they come after you. You won't stand a chance—unless you get someone to side you in this."

McNeen watched the man steadily. "Something on your mind, Glen?"

Creasey's tone turned brittle. "Sheriff Letham is going to dig himself a hole and crawl into it when he hears about the Templins. There's no one else in this town who'll give you a hand—unless it's me."

McNeen's gaze soured. "And you've got a price, of course."

Creasey nodded curtly. "That borax claim you found is my price."

McNeen sighed.

The man's voice was flat, cold. "Give me the location of it, and I'll back you against the Templins. As simple as that, McNeen. That borax claim for my help against the pair of fast guns that came here to kill you."

McNeen said softly, "You've turned injun, Glen."

"Don't try to get proud with me!" Creasey said, and temper rode roughshod into his tone. "Your time for playing cagey with me is past, fellow. I'm offering you a chance to save your life for the price of that borax claim."

"No," McNeen said gently, "your offer is to shoot down two men you have no reason at all to hate for the price of that borax. You've turned injun, and don't even know it."

Hate flared up in Glen Creasey's eyes, and he said, "I take it you don't like my offer."

"Not any, Glen."

"I'll be around, bucko."

"I've killed one man," McNeen murmured. "I'll not pay to have others killed."

"You're taking me wrong," Creasey said, contemptuously. "I'll be around when the Templins come after you, McNeen. That's what I want you to know. I'll be there to see how proud you act when they gun you down."

Dusk had brought relief from the heat, and beyond town the hills were piled black and raw-boned against the deepening sky. A lamp had been lighted in Adolph Gerner's store, but there was no sign of life at Sheriff Letham's jail office. McNeen smiled wearily as he made his way along the plank walk toward the Keg House. He didn't remember until the Templins rode in that he had a chore to do somewhere out of town.

Memory opened the door in McNeen's mind again, and he saw Esta's teasing eyes and laughing lips, and he thought, It was only a game with her. Roy's dead and I'm gone, and she's found others to take our place. And as he came to the saloon, he resolutely closed the door in his mind, so that he could no longer see the girl.

He went through the saloon's batwings and halted. His coming had not gone unnoticed. The three punchers at the table looked up from their cards and watched him in a still, searching way. They got up then with the quick jerkiness of alarmed men, and drifted hurriedly to the side walls.

Ernie Kinsman put down his bar rag and made his way at once to the far end of the mahogany, careful to keep his hands high and in clear view. A townsman set down his glass, looking over his shoulder at McNeen with round scared eyes, then wheeled abruptly and went plunging out.

The two men at the bar watched McNeen steadily through the wall mirror, Ed Templin with a drink at his lips and Clint with a smile spreading thin and tight above the sharp shelf of his jaw.

It was Clint who broke the hush. "Someone just come in, Ed?"

Ed Templin set down his glass. "A yella dog, looks like to me."

They turned then, two big-boned men with their backs to the bar, took a step away from each other, shifting their bodies in a way that thrust their holstered guns out in the clear and close to lowering hands.

"You were a long time getting here," McNeen said.

Ed spoke almost pleasantly. "We kept trying. You've done a mighty lot of running the last year."

"Too much running," McNeen said.

Clint's eyelids drew closer together. "So now you've stopped running. Is that how this is, McNeen?"

"That's how it is Clint."

Ed Templin's face seemed to deepen and darken, so that his grin was a jeering gargyle expression. He said deliberately, "I don't see a gun on you."

"Haven't worn one for more than a year," McNeen said. "I've kept it packed in my warbag."

Ed's malice pinpointed. "Too yella to wear it?"

MCNEEN thought about that for a long sober minute. Then he nodded. "I guess you could say that."

"That's too bad," Clint said softly. "Just too damn bad, fella, because you're going to go get your gun, strap it on, and come back here so we can see it. You understand what I'm telling you?"

McNeen stood motionless for a long while, feeling the hate of the two men pile up against him. He moved his shoulders wearily.

"Would it do any good to say I'm sorry about Roy, that ever since the fight I've—"

"Not any, McNeen."

McNeen moved his shoulders again. There was an ache deep between the blades, as though he had carried a huge weight for longer than he could bear, and there was no way for him to get out from under the weight and ease the hurt.

He said, deliberately and quietly, "It was a fair fight that day, and I killed a man,

and I've been sorry for it ever since. How many men have you killed, Ed?"

"Suppose you tell me."

"Three, I've heard."

"And you can add a pair for Clint," Ed said stonily.

McNeen watched the two men. "Don't they ever come back and look at you? Don't you ever see the faces of the men you killed, and hear them talk to you?"

Ed grinned crookedly. "We'll tell you after we've cut you down," he said. "Go get your gun, McNeen."

"No," McNeen said. "No."

The two men moved forward, closing in on him. Ed Templin spoke almost plaintively. "You keep making mistakes, McNeen. You didn't run when we got to town, and that was a mistake. Coming here was another. Saying you're not going to get your gun is still another. Because you are going to strap on that gun, McNeen. You are, or we'll gut-shoot you anyhow."

The two men halted close in front of McNeen. Ed put his hand on his weapon. "Don't keep us waiting any longer." Then violence leaped into his voice. "We've already waited too long," he said harshly, and jerked his gun.

He clubbed out the long barrel, slashing brutally at McNeen's face. McNeen swayed back from the blow and caught the wrist as it whipped past him. He twisted the man's arm around, yanked on it, jerking the man forward as he threw his right. He heard the wind gush out of Ed's belly, shoved him aside, and lunged at Clint. He drove a blow to that man's face, and kept piling his weight against the fellow while he struck for the face and body. He slammed Clint back against the bar, and he was brutal in this moment of bitter challenge. He heard the explosion of Clint's shot, the gun still trapped in its holster and the bullet ripping into the floor at his feet. He sledged the man's middle, folded him with the torture of those blows, and

when Clint sagged he caught him by the shoulder and sent him spinning to the floor beside his brother.

He stood over them, tall and pale, and with a hot wildness in his eyes.

"Doesn't that show you anything?" he said in a harsh, bitter rage. "You two taught your brother all you know about guns. But he didn't have a chance when he drew against me. Neither of you will ever see the day when you can beat me. That's what I'm afraid of. I'm too good with a gun—better than any man ought to be with one. That's why I don't want to have to draw against you, because if I do I'll kill you both."

He wheeled savagely, shouldered through the batwing doors and out into the deepening dusk. He saw Glen Creasey standing close by one of the windows, and he used his voice roughly on the man.

"You saw what happened in there. I'm telling you, kid! You're never so tough that there's not someone tougher. You keep playing around with that gun you're packing, and you'll end up on some saloon floor."

Creasey's laugh was one of cold derision. "That's where you're wrong," he said thinly. "Because I'm like you, McNeen. Good with a gun. Damn good. Better even than you."

THERE was a bullet hole in the faded wallpaper that Wes McNeen never failed to see as he went up the hotel stairs to his room. The slug had punctured the wall several inches above the hand rail, and above the hole some man had penciled a cynic's inscription to a long forgotten fight: *Malpais Red—slow triggers buy fast graves.*

McNeen went past that mark of violence, and, at the second-floor landing, turned down the darkened hallway to his room. He closed the door behind him, and after a moment's sober thought drew the heavy curtains across the two windows before

striking a match for the lamp. The darkness rolled away as he turned up the wick, and he saw the small room that had been his home for more than a year now. The furnishings were meager: a brass bed, a single chair, a chest of drawers with a crockery wash basin on it, and a rim-chipped pitcher.

He pulled the chair around and sat down, the blaze of temper dropping out of him and leaving his thoughts heavy and morose. He had not, he knew, won himself a thing in beating down the Templins and warning them. Because those same qualities were in himself, he understood the streaky pride and supreme confidence characteristic of all gunmen. What he had done to the Templins he saw now as a foolish and senseless thing. His fists had not beaten fear into them. He had only rawed their pride further, and honed to a sharper edge their malice and hate.

He heard footsteps on the stairs and then a light knocking on his door.

"Can I come in, Wes? It's Amy."

She came quickly into the room, closing the door after her. He looked around at her; a little irritably.

"Not right for you to come into a man's room," he said.

"Don't be cross, Wes."

She came around and sat down on the edge of the bed, watching him silently. Presently she said, "I was talking with Glen. He told me what you did to the Templins."

"Damn fool thing to do."

"But surely they must know now that it would be dangerous to force you into a fight!"

"All they know," McNeen said flatly, "is that they've drawn against other men and killed them. They believe they're the best in the world. That's what makes gunfighters what they are. They never stop until they're crippled or killed."

Worry deepened in the girl's eyes. "Men are such blind fools, Wes."

"I wouldn't argue against that," McNeen said sourly. "What about young Creasey?"

Amy was silent for a long moment. Bitterness was in her face, and a haunted anxiety. She made a vague motion with her hand.

"That's what I had to tell you," she said. "That's why I had to come here and warn you."

McNEEN raised his head a little. She stood up and made a restless turn around the room. She returned to the bed and sat down again, her hands clasped tight in her lap.

"You remember telling me that Glen was pushing himself out on a ragged edge, Wes? For the last month I've watched him change. There was always a wildness in him, but now it has turned mean. Mean and deadly. The way some men are when they are trying to pick a fight. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

"I know," McNeen murmured, and wagged his head wearily. You feel that harsh, hungry temper building up in you, that dark rage of self-sureness and power, and you know that nothing can stop you from going out and finding your man and killing him. "I know, Amy."

"Glen told me," the girl said in a hushed, aching tone. "He told me the Templins aren't going to leave town. But he swears he won't let them get you, because if you're dead he'll never know where the borax claim is."

McNeen dug the makings out of his pocket, his fingers stiff and unsteady as he tapered his smoke.

"Glen swears that if the Templins are still in town tomorrow he's going to force them into a fight. He says you could beat them with a gun, and that he's better than you are. That's what he kept telling me."

McNeen took a slow breath. "I've seen the kid practise. He's right about how good he is."

Amy cried out at him in soft despair. "Glen told me he'll fight the Templins tomorrow and kill them. And then he swore he'd come after you. He said he'd make you tell him about the borax, or he'd kill you, too."

McNeen sighed. "If it would do any good, I'd give him that borax."

He raised his eyes and looked moodily at the girl. "But it wouldn't, Amy. Glen has turned bronc. He's hungry. He's practised one time too many with his gun, and now he has to use it in a fight. The borax is only an excuse, and he doesn't even know it."

"Wes—Wes!"

"It makes a man a little crazy, knowing how fast he is. Believe me, Amy, I know. He's got to have a fight to prove to himself how good he is with a gun. A smile from a girl or the slant of a man's hat can set him off. And when he's killed once, he's got to kill again, because the dead man has friends, or because there's always another hungry man wanting to prove his speed. I know—I know."

Amy was crying softly.

McNeen said gently, "I'll do what I can to stop him."

There was a gun blast from the night-blackened street outside, and a second. The drawn curtains jerked under the impact of the bullets, and plaster dust came sifting down from the ceiling.

McNeen threw himself out of his chair in a headlong dive, caught the girl with his out-thrust arms, and carried her down to the floor with him. The echoes of the shots ribboned away and faded. A man's jeering hoot rose long and wild against the night, and afterwards silence flowed in.

The girl was down on the floor beside the bed, alarm glossing her eyes, and McNeen was aware of the nearness of her, the softness, the warmth of her, and he heard himself saying, "It was the Templins serving their notice on me."

But his voice was small and far-away

and meaningless, and he was aware only of the girl's soft warmth and the ache of his loneliness as he kissed her. He drew instantly away.

He said roughly, "I'll do what I can for Glen."

"Wes," she whispered. "Oh, Wes."

CHAPTER

3

Dead Man's Street

Through the open window of his room he could hear the sounds of a town coming alive to a new day. The air was cool, but the promise of heat was in the brilliance of the rising sun. Somewhere on Twenty-Mile's weedy rim a rooster was voicing its raucous challenge. A boy shrilled exuberantly beneath McNeen's window and went racing off down the alley, a pup yapping at his heels. The muffled clapping of a walking horse came up from the street, and through the window McNeen glimpsed a cowhand riding by, sitting tall in his saddle, with his head held high, as if everything in his world was smooth and easy and spilling over with honey. A man wanted to jump a hundred feet when he felt like that, McNeen remembered, and watched the rider with the only real envy he had ever known in his life.

He dragged his warbag out from under the bed and rummaged around in it until he located the gun and holster belt. He unrolled it, feeling the oiled, hand-rubbed softness of the leather.

He wondered how many long hours he had spent working that pliant softness into the holster, so that the gun would slip smooth and fast out of it. And then he had dyed red the rawhide lacings and riveted a pair of silver dollars into the face of the sheath, to pretty up the gear. The vanity of a fool, McNeen thought.

He cleaned the grease out of the gun and thumbed shells into the cylinder, leaving the sixth chamber empty to carry the

firing pin safely. He stood up, strapping on the weapon. The gun sagged low on his flank, butt jutting slightly forward, the familiar weight and balance like a thing that fitted and belonged, almost an integral part of him. A gun was like that to some men. They had the knack, the instinctive skill that was polished to a deadly flash by practise. It was like that with Wes McNeen. And with young Glen Creasey. Men born to the gun.

He went out of his room and down the stairs, seeing once again the bullet hole above the hand rail and the cryptic inscription penciled on the faded wallpaper.

Amy came out of her quarters as he reached the bottom of the stairs, and he felt the impact of her quiet beauty. She was wearing an apron over her dress, and there was a smudge of flour on her forehead where she had pushed back a rebellious lock of hair. She came toward him, smiling.

"If you're ready for some breakfast—" Then she saw the gun he was wearing, and alarm leaped into her eyes. "Oh, Wes!"

"Time comes when a man's got to stop running, Amy." Her face was quite pale as she watched him.

Always before there had been a sense of deep and easy goodness when he was with her. He searched for it now, but it was gone. Restlessness was in him, an edgy impatience that kept gnawing at him. He needed movement to build a wall against that rising heat of tension.

He said emptily, "It's going to be another hot day."

It was difficult to make idle conversation when his body craved activity so desperately. It was hard to think of small things to say to a troubled girl when death stood waiting somewhere on the street outside.

"I'm not hungry," he said. "I'd be obliged if you'd hold up my breakfast until later."

"Of course."

"This day-by day heat wears a body," he

said, and wondered why his voice sounded so dim and faraway. "Montana, now, is the place. Cool and green and wide as the world. You ever been up there?"

"Once, Wes. Long ago, when I was a little girl."

"You never told me that before."

"You never asked me, Wes."

There are a thousand things, he thought, that I've wanted to ask you, but never did. A thousand dreams I wanted to tell you about, Amy.

Silence had come between them like a cold and dreary weight, and he didn't know how to break it.

"Well," he said, and turned abruptly away, toward the door. The swift touch of her hand halted him, rigidly motionless.

"Wes?"

He waited, hearing her crying softly behind him.

He said gently, "Amy, if it's about young Creasey—"

"No, Wes! Glen went out several minutes ago. I saw him when he went out, and he was wearing his gun, and there was a look in his eyes—"

McNeen looked through the wide windows at the street, thinking dismally, You ride one red mile, and then one day you ride another.

"Don't worry, Amy," he murmured. "Don't worry at all."

HE WENT through the doorway and out into the street, a tall easy-moving man who had done this thing a thousand times in his mind and learned to hate it. He paused mid-street while decision shaped itself in his mind. But there was no way to plan a thing like this. You hunted, or you were hunted; it was as simple and uncomplicated as that.

He turned back to the plank walk, his gaze searching out and examining the small apertures of the street as he moved. He saw a man come out of Gepner's store, halt rigidly, and then duck instantly back

into the building. Somewhere, her voice shrill with urgency, a woman was calling for her son to come home at once. A dog was yapping excitedly on one of the backlots.

He came to the Keg House and went inside with a quick, lunging stride that carried him a swift step to one side of the doors. He saw startled alarm flare up in Ernie Kinsman's eyes.

"Not here," the man yelled, his voice highpitched with strain. "No one here but me, Wes."

He went outside again, carrying on his methodical search of each building on the north side of the street. He saw the bootmaker crouching behind his bench, and in the newspaper shop he saw old Whitey Rybolt bending low behind his type case. He moved steadily on, and, when he reached the end of the street, sweat was cold and slick under his arms and on his hands.

He crossed the street and searched the livery stables, his mind center-grooved on this dark and deadly task. There were a hundred places where men could wait and watch in this town, a hundred concealments where a man could strike and kill.

He turned back through the livery yard's wide arched gate. A breathless quiet had fallen over the town. And yet the town was a thousand eyes that watched him, and a thousand voices that shouted at him.

And then he saw the men. He saw the Templins come out of that tight slot of an alley beside the jail, moving together out into the street to take their position and wait for him. A great weight seemed to lift from McNeen's nerves. This, at last, was a thing to be seen and understood. He started toward the two men.

He was nearing Gepner's store when Glen Creasey stepped out of Moynahan's feed store and into the street. The man was between McNeen and the Templins, a thin shape against the flared sunlight, with an easy and ready balance to his body and the

swing of his hand near his gun as he faced the two gunmen. They studied him with sharpening interest. All doubt dropped out of the Templins, then. They understood the fact, assessed it, accepted it bleakly.

Clint thrust his challenge roughly through the heat. "What's in this for you, fellow?"

Creasey's laugh was softly sardonic. "The question, gentlemen, is what's in this for you?"

"Just another fool kid," Ed said, and drove his hand down to his gun.

There was the flash and the violence. McNeen saw the bullet sledge into Ed Templin's body just above his belt, slamming him backward and spinning him around as he fell. He saw the slugs tear into Clint's chest, convulsing him with their brutal fury and throwing him down into the dust of the street.

Creasey spun instantly to face McNeen, a hot wildness of mocking derision in his eyes.

"That's two out of your way, McNeen," he said, and there was a thin singing note in his voice. "Only me left for you to answer to, now."

McNeen shoved toward the man in hard, temper-goaded strides. The warning in Creasey's eyes halted him. The man still gripped his gun. He holstered it with slow and deliberate mockery.

His mouth twisted. "I told you I was fast enough, McNeen."

"You're fast, Glen—too fast."

"Faster even than you, would you say?"

"Faster than I ever was, Glen."

The man said with soft contempt, "Then you ought to know how this is, McNeen. I want the location of that borax claim. Tell me where it is, and I'll let you go. Stay stubborn and proud, and you've got my gun to beat."

McNeen stared wearily at the man. "Even now you don't know, do you?" he said bitterly. "I'll show you, Glen."

He moved in a slow half circle, with the man's watchful eyes never leaving him, and when he came to the fallen men he halted. Ed Templin wasn't dead—not yet. His breathing was a thin, scraping sound coming through the silence.

Creasey's eyes were on McNeen and on his gun, and sudden temper broke through McNeen and turned his voice harsh.

"Don't look at me, Glen. Look at the work your gun just did!"

Creasey's gaze shifted, lowered.

"Look long and close at them," McNeen said savagely. "You're never going to forget what you're seeing now. Have a look at the way Clint fell. And how Ed keeps watching you as he dies. They're not targets like you've always practised on to get so good with your gun. These are men, and it was your bullets that tore the life out of them and left them the way they are now. Look close, kid, for as long as you live you're going to see them walking

through your mind. You'll never forget it."

He saw the sickness rise up in Creasey's eyes, the retching horror of knowing. He saw the spasmed convulsions of the throat, and heard the thick, gagging cry as the man turned and plunged blindly away.

McNeen pulled himself around, a great weariness rolling through him as he made his way to the hotel. Amy met him on the porch, and he halted beside her, not knowing what to say. He turned his head, and his gaze traveled along the street until he was looking at the shape standing motionless and alone at the edge of town.

"I'm sorry about Glen," he said then. "I tried, Amy."

He felt the girl's hand on his arm. "You see so much, and yet so little," she said softly. "You never saw me." She turned him to her with the pressure of her hand. She was smiling in a strange, wonderful way, and he took her arm, and they looked at each other for the first time. ● ● ●

LISTED below (jumbled fashion) are the names and nicknames of ten horses—type, breed, color, etc.—together with a brief description of each. Can you match up at least seven of them correctly for a passing score? 8-9 is good; 10 excellent.

- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| 1. COB | (a) the nearest wild relative to the domesticated horse. |
| 2. CURTAL | (b) a horse that's easily winded. |
| 3. COCKTAIL | (c) a spirited, hard-to-control horse. |
| 4. HOBBY | (d) a strong, thick-set, short-legged horse. |
| 5. BIDET | (e) a brown, red-yellow-colored horse. |
| 6. BLOWER | (f) an underbred horse. |
| 7. PULLER | (g) the off-spring of a stallion and a she-ass. |
| 8. PRZHEVALSKI'S HORSE | (h) a small horse. |
| 9. HINNY | (i) a slow, steady horse. |
| 10. SORREL | (j) one with a docked—i. e., shortened—tail. |

ANSWERS

1-d, 2-j, 3-f, 4-i, 5-h, 6-b, 7-c, 8-a, 9-g, 10-e.

DEATH WAITS HERE

By ROY P. SHOTWELL

His hand dipped and rose with incredible speed.



Two things a green sheriff like Jeff Crawford wears where everyone can see them—his badge and his pride — and gunslick Matt McKenna was there to take the shine off both!

I CAN see him yet, standing there at the corner of Arapaho and Main, with the sun slanting full against the flat planes of his face and his John B. tipped back on hair that was too yellow to show much of the gray.

He wasn't a man you'd remember because of his height or weight, for he wasn't overly tall or heavy. Nor did he have

the muscle-packed bulk of most range men. It was the way he moved that you remembered: a kind of balanced, fluid, flowing grace, smooth and easy, like you see in a catamount when a pack of hounds chouse it up a ridge and into the *piñons*.

It was that silk-smooth way he handled himself which you never forgot about Matt McKenna. But there were other things about him that etched themselves just as indelibly into the mind, never to be disremembered.

. . . the free-swinging way his gun rode low on his thigh, with the gutta-percha butt plates glinting dully in the sun.

. . . the quiet pressure of his voice when he spoke to a man.

. . . and the calm self-certainty that lay in his face when fury was flaring wild and brutal around him.

. . . or the way his eyes, at idle moments, seemed to measure and mark all details around him, as though each slanting shadow and sun-painted highlight was a part of some vivid picture he was carefully painting on the screen of his mind.

Those things the people of Spurlock will always remember about Matt McKenna. Those are the things—and more—that I will never forget.

I was twenty-four at the time, and there were those who said I was too young and unseasoned to wear the sheriff's badge in a town like Spurlock. I hadn't asked for the job. But after Clint Wiggam was killed breaking up the raid those Montana punchers had made to spring one of their friends out of jail, the town fathers had tried futilely to find another man of Clint's caliber to take over the job. In a trail town like Spurlock a hundred a month and found is lean pay for a nickle-plated star and a probable six-by-four plot up on Cemetery Hill. I ought to know. I'm the one they finally pinned the badge on.

I took it partly because there was no one else, and partly because I thought I could do a good job . . .

IT WAS late Fall, and I had been wearing the badge for about two months when Matt McKenna showed up in town. Frost was in the air those mornings, and down in the bottoms of Refugio creek the aspens were turning to gold. The first snow of the season had whitened the high heads of the Three Sisters, and there was talk about cattle herds being drifted down into the lower valleys. It was that time of year when a man breathes deep and looks out at God's fine world and thinks he'd like to live forever.

I was waiting on the depot platform when the Wednesday train pulled in, puffing steam into the chill air and spraying a fine rain of cinders down on the station.

It had been a habit of Clint Wiggam's to be on hand to watch each in-coming and out-going train. A good idea to know who's new in town and who's shucking it, Clint had often observed; and being unseasoned to the sheriff's badge, I was taking Clint's old habits for my own. That's how a green hand learns his trade, by following in the tracks of a top hand.

Lou Danvers' wife was the first to get off the train that day, carrying a bulging shawl-covered basket that was about all such a small woman could manage. As she came across the platform I looked past her toward the coach, but I couldn't see her twin sons anywhere.

I didn't offer to take the basket from her, knowing she wouldn't allow me. It wasn't all pride on her part; it was mostly fear, I reckon. Folks in a town like Spurlock are quick to start talking when their sheriff shows how calf-eyed he is about a woman who is married to another man. I didn't want Lou Danvers to hear any talk like that about Molly. Lou was mean enough without having gossip make him meaner.

I touched the brim of my hat, and spoke gravely from a respectable distance. "Afternoon, Miz Danvers. You had a nice visit with your folks, I hope."

"Yes, thank you." She set down the basket which contained, I was sure, fried chicken and canned preserves her mother had put up for her. Lou Danvers didn't have the reputation in town of being a good provider for his family.

Molly had the rounded softness a man likes to see in a woman. But there was a harassed look deep down in her eyes that made her look older than her twenty-three years. Yet she tried to hide that with a smile as she spoke.

"A pleasant visit, Mr. Crawford, but a busy one. The twins are like young colts."

"They're lively ones, all right."

Her gaze drifted down the street briefly, then pulled back to me, looking at the badge pinned to my vest. "Lou wrote that you were the new sheriff, Mr. Crawford."

"Yes'm."

She shook her head slightly. "A dangerous job for so young a man," she said. Like an old woman speaking to a boy.

"I'm old enough to spit in the street, Miz Danvers," I said. "Older than some of the people who talk about me being too young for my job."

But I don't think she really understood what I was trying to point out, that we had grown up together and had gone to the same school and that it was only her marriage to Lou Danvers that had put us in separate worlds.

She took a slow breath then, and asked what I realized had been in her mind all the while, nagging her,

"Jeff,—Mr. Crawford—how is Lou?"

"Why, just fine."

"He hasn't been drinking?"

"Not any, Miz Danvers."

Her eyes begged me for the truth. "You'd tell me if he had been?"

It wasn't easy for me to keep that distance between us. The station agent was watching us with the wide-awake interest of an incurable gossip, but I knew he couldn't hear us through the steady chuffing of the engine.

"Yes'm," I said, and remembered the discolored bruise, a swollen lividness that had been on her cheek the day she had taken the train out of town two months ago.

"I sure would," I said again, and wondered if I was helping her any by lying.

Her eyes searched me for a long moment, then with the faintest of shrugs she stooped and picked up the basket.

"Thank you, Mr. Crawford."

"Look," I said abruptly, and I couldn't keep the harshness out of my voice. "If Lou gives you any more trouble, you let me know. You understand, Molly?"

She nodded vaguely, but I knew she wouldn't tell me if Lou beat her up again. She had pride in her. And fear. Lou Danvers was a mean one to deal with in a fight. She turned away, leaving me feeling somehow like a kid trying awkwardly to act like a man.

NOT MANY people got off the train that day. There were two fancy girls who had been hired by Ben Henderschott to work in his saloon, and a pair of drummers all duded up in laced shoes, boiled shirts and hard hats. A cowhand I recognized as working for one of the Basin outfits climbed stiffly down to the platform. He gave me a red-eyed glare, hauled around, and pointed himself irritably toward the nearest saloon the way most punchers do after they've been to Dodge City and heard the tiger howl once too often.

The engine cuffed and wheezed and the drive wheel squealed, grinding into movement again. I waited there as Clint Wigam always had, until the last coach rolled away from the station. It was as I was starting to turn back toward my office that I heard the dryly amused voice of a man close behind me, a nerve-jerking sound.

"You must be new to that badge you're wearing, mister sheriff."

I turned sharply around, and for some reason there was, suddenly and swiftly, a

deep, roiling coldness in the pit of my stomach.

"I got off the end coach," the stranger said, and his green-gray eyes mocked me acidly. "You only thought you were watching, mister sheriff."

My hand was close to my gun, but the stranger didn't care. The thorny amusement that was in his gaze didn't change as he watched me, measured me, dismissed me. He laughed then in an odd, softly derisive way.

"If a fellow came here to collect a lawman's scalp, you would be easy," he said with gentle malice. "Very easy, mister sheriff."

I can look back now and remember how his words seemed to bite into me like gritty ice. Looking back, I don't think it was so much what he said as it was the look in his eyes as he spoke. That dry, thorny irony that was, somehow, almost pitying; the way a gunman looks at a poor, proud fool he knows he eventually is going to kill. That was how the stranger looked at me that day.

I stood there watching him irritably through a long moment of tight silence. The fact that he had managed so easily to come up behind me and then told me about it with such cool mockery did not help any. A new sheriff wears his pride out in the open, as he does his first badge, where all eyes can see it.

I said shortly, "You seem to know a lot about collecting law scalps."

His smile was slow and easy. He shrugged.

"I don't believe I caught your name, stranger."

"McKenna," he said, and something in his eyes jeered at me. "Matt McKenna."

You hear about them all at a county law office, the great and the near-great—the thieves and knife artists, and the wild ones ambitious to build up their reputations with a gun. The quick and the dead, the card cheats and the backalley thugs.

Sit at a sheriff's desk, and you see the constant flow of dodgers and you hear the gossip that travels from county to county, from trail town to range town. News is brought to you by the U. S. Marshal who is passing through your town, by the sheriff from a neighboring county who is on the trail of a wanted man, by the deputy just recently released from the Kansas City hospital, and the town marshal who had enough sense to quit his job while he was still alive.

Have you heard about Bat Masterson being wounded in a gunfight over at Dodge City the other night? Talk like that; the gossip of the trade. Yessir, the Wyoming man tells you, Bill Hickok's dead, shot in the back by a two-bit gambler. Wes Hardin's in prison . . . they tell me the Earps are moving out to Arizona Territory, town of Tombstone . . . Clay Allison killed himself another town marshal last month . . . I hear-tell that Matt McKenna is drifting out this way . . .

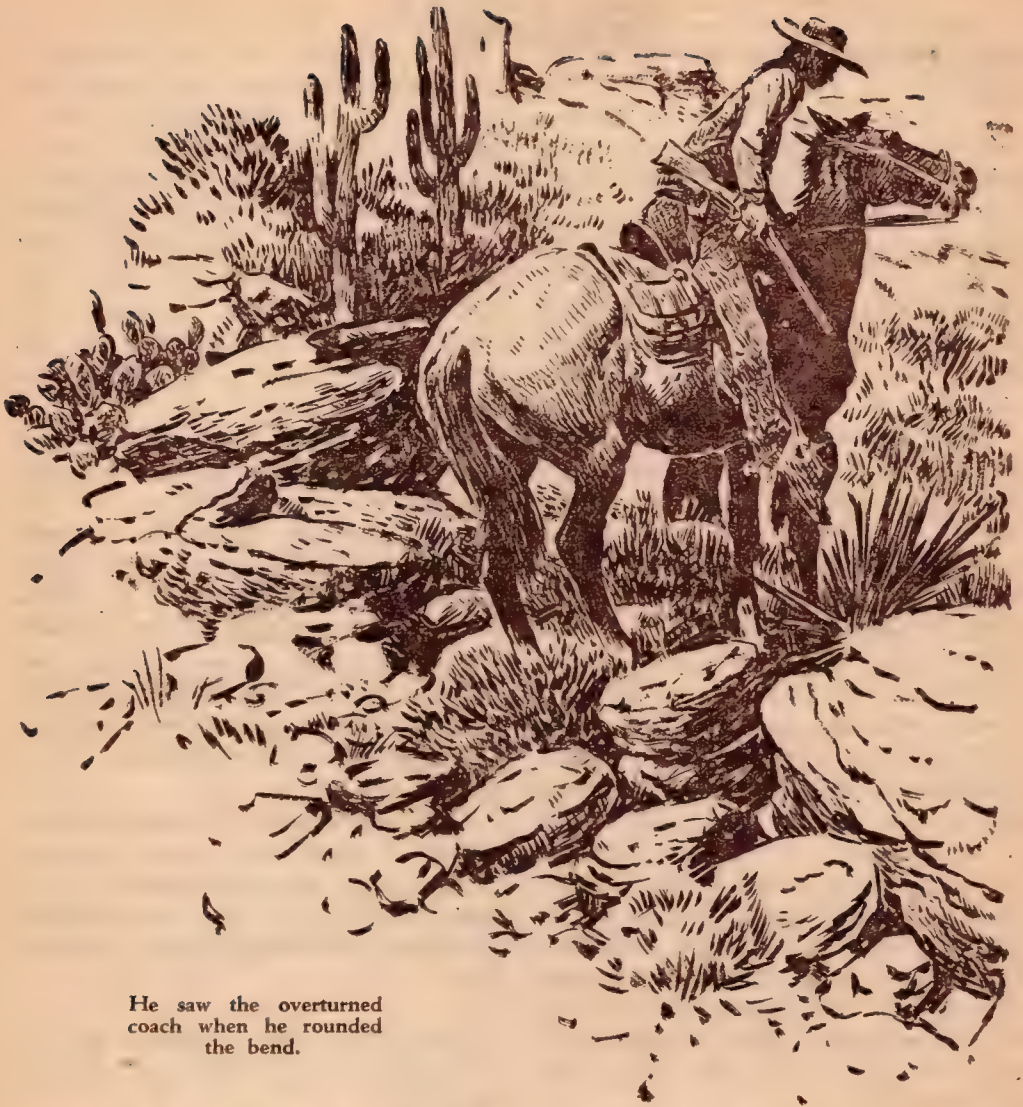
You listen closely, for your life might depend on some small shard of information carried to you by a drifting man. It's what you don't see or don't know that gets you killed; Clint Wiggam had always said that.

AND NOW Matt McKenna, the most feared of them all, had come to Spurlock.

I stared at the man, remembering everything I had ever heard about him. Those men, the fools and ambitious hotheads, who had tried to match his incredible speed and failed . . . the saloon he had shot up and wrecked that time down in El Paso . . . the town marshals he had cowed and driven out of Wichita and Hayes and Tascosa. Matt McKenna, in whose shade Clay Allison walked.

"So you're Matt McKenna," I said, and in my ears my voice seemed a dim, hollow sound.

(Continued on page 104)



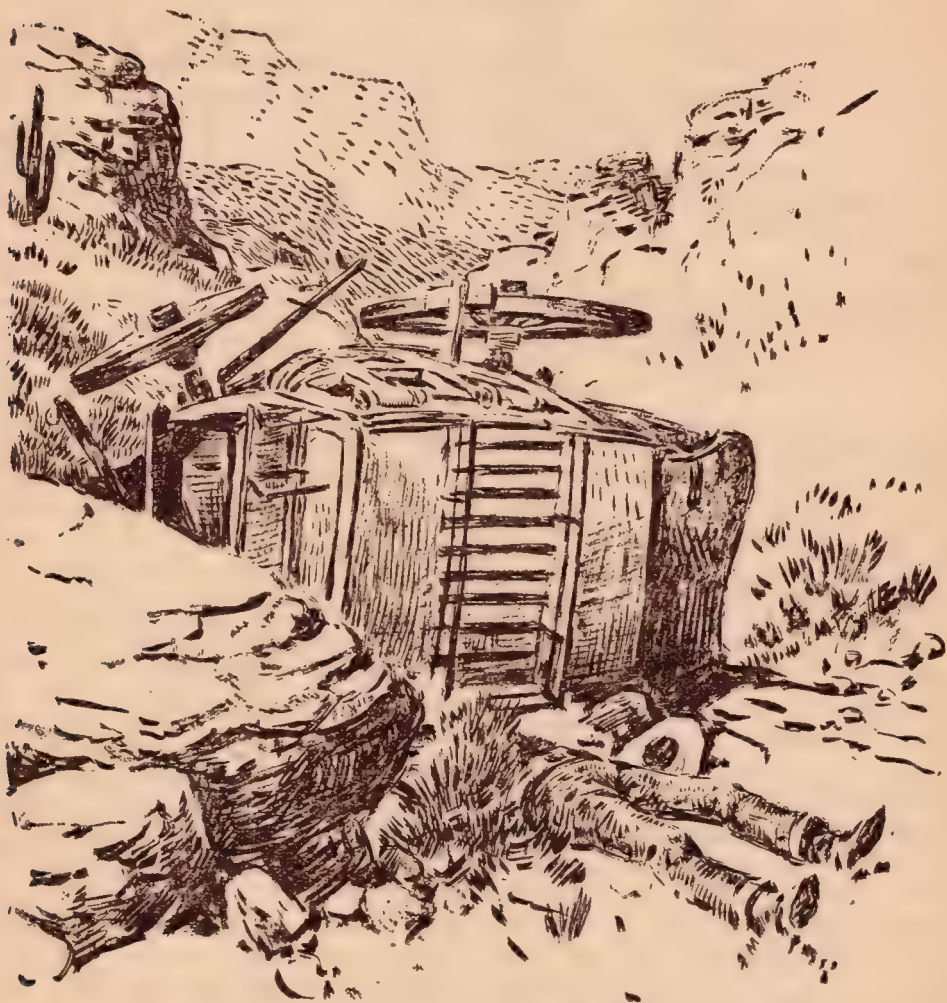
He saw the overturned
coach when he rounded
the bend.

THE DEVIL'S DRAW

JEFF BELLEW turned in his saddle, resting his right hand on the cantle, eyeing the side of the pass which towered above him, stippled with mesquite and catclaw. A cold wind blew through the pass, rippling the brush. It was an hour before darkness, and Jeff had ten miles to go before he reached the safety of Dragoon Pass swing station. He wasn't

far from the place where Chris Wellman, his predecessor, had been found with a slug through his back, his mailbags slit, and the mail and checks gone. That had been a month before, and no trace of the killer, or killers, had ever turned up. Jeff studied the slope. He was sure he had seen something move, something alien to the natural features of the pass. He touched the Henry

The man he trailed lay sprawled in the road, clawing the loose earth, and Jeff Bellew knew at last the fate that awaited him—and all men who dared hunt the killer who waited in Dragoon Pass!



By GORDON D. SHIRREFFS

rifle sheathed beneath his right leg. He was getting jumpy. Yet Dragoon Pass wasn't exactly a peaceful spot. Apaches and dragoons had battled there before the Civil War. Troopers had tangled with Cochise there more than once, and here and there, buried in the brush, were the scorched remains of wagon ironwork, from a massacre that had taken place in '71, not two

years before. Jeff shrugged and touched his bay with his spurs. There was an uneasy, brooding air in the lonely pass that he didn't like.

The rifle flatted off as he reached a bend in the winding rutted road, the slug singing thinly over Jeff's head. He bent low over the saddlehorn and sank the steel deeply into the bay's flanks. The gun report

echoed and re-echoed through the pass, died away slowly. The bay stretched out as Jeff pulled the Henry rifle from its sheath and levered a cartridge into the chamber. The gun cracked again. The bullet sang wildly from a rock five feet ahead of the racing bay. The wind was playing hell with the hidden sniper's shooting. Jeff turned in the saddle and fired up the slope at a drifting puff of smoke. There was a sudden quick movement in the brush, and the rifle spat again. The slug buried itself in the saddle two inches in front of Jeff's right thigh. The killer was getting the range. Jeff fired twice more, and then the bay swept around a curve, splashed through Roadrunner Creek, and lifted himself to the higher ground. In a moment Jeff was racing through a grove of scrub oaks. He did not slacken Dandy's pace until the bay was half a mile beyond the grove.

The cold sweat ran down Jeff's face as he eased back his hat. It had been too damned close to suit him. He took out his knife after he slid the rifle home in its sheath and pried out the slug buried deeply in the wooden tree of the saddle. It was misshapen, but he gauged it as fifty caliber or larger. He slipped it into his pocket. He glanced back up the pass now beginning to be shrouded in shadows. The break he had been waiting for had come, but he hadn't learned much. As an inspector for the Post Office Department he had asked for the job of tracking down the murderer of Chris Wellman. He had been transferred from up north, in the Flagstaff area, at his own request, for he had been in Chris' troop in New Mexico during the war. There had been no delay. His record was good, and no one else had been able to find a single clue in the Wellman case.

Draagoon Pass swing station squatted on a shoulder of rock which thrust itself out of the side of the pass with Roadrunner Creek winding along its base. Yellow lamp-light showed through the narrow windows. A mule bawled noisily from a corral as Jeff

trotted the bay across the rough plank bridge below the station. A big man came out of the station, trailing a rifle, and looked down at him. "That you, Jeff?" he hailed.

"Sure is, Sherm!" called back Jeff as the bay started up the rutted slope.

Sherm Danby leaned on his rifle as Jeff unsaddled the bay and took the two mailbags from in back of the saddle. He pulled his rifle from its sheath and grinned at Sherm. "How's it going?" he asked.

Danby shrugged. "Same as ever."

"Any Apache trouble?"

Sherm shook his big head. "No. You have any trouble?"

Jeff threw the mailbags over his shoulder. "No." He turned toward the station. "Any coaches come through today?"

"Just eastbound. Business is bad, Jeff. I'm thinkin' they might close up Draagoon Pass for coach service. Most travelers prefer going by way of Tinaja Pass. It's longer but smoother. Besides, it hasn't got the reputation this damned hole has."

Sherm opened the thick, iron-sheathed door for Jeff. Two harp lamps lit the big common room. Jeff eyed the place curiously. It had been cleaned up. Gone were the filthy garboons and the dirty Navajo rugs that had hung on the stained walls. The walls themselves had been white-washed and hung with new *gerga* to a height of five feet from the floor to protect clothing from the whitewash. Checkered tablecloths enlivened the low-ceiled room. There was an air of freshness about the place. Jeff turned. "Hell, Sherm, you gone in for housekeeping lately?"

Sherm rested his rifle in a corner and rubbed his fresh shaven cheeks. "No. My niece came to stay with me. She's from that new town in the Salt River Valley. Phoenix, it's called. Her father died a short time ago, and she hasn't anyone but me now."

Jeff placed his mailbags on a table and grinned. "Tough on the kid," he said.

Sherm looked at him quickly. "Kid?"

THE DEVIL'S DRAW

You've got a surprise comin', sonny." He raised his voice. "Joan! Oh, Joan! Grub for a hungry man!"

JEFF TURNED as a footfall sounded in the kitchen. He almost whistled as he saw the young woman standing in the doorway. She was tall, with ashy blonde hair, tightly braided and bound smoothly about her well-shaped head. A pair of clear blue eyes studied him. Now Jeff knew why the old station had undergone such a transformation since his last trip of a week ago.

"This is my niece, Joan Danby," said Sherm with a wave of his hand. "My brother Jim's girl. This is Jeff Bellew, government mail carrier, Joanny."

She nodded and smiled. "You must be hungry," she said.

Jeff swept off his hat and bowed slightly. "I am, Miss Danby. Rode in from Spoford. Left there before dawn. Didn't have much to eat on the road."

"Sit down. I'll have something ready in a few minutes." She turned as though to go and then eyed Jeff. "There's a fresh huck towel and water in the back passage."

Sherm grinned at Jeff as the girl went into the kitchen. "You see what I mean? She'll set you right. Washing before eatin'!"

Jeff slid a cigar into the station master's shirt pocket. "What's wrong with that?"

Sherm took out the cigar and scratched a lucifer on the wall, then hastily dabbed at the scratch in the whitewash with his hand. "Oh Lord, she's even got me scared of messin' up this hole." He lit the cigar and followed Jeff into the back passage.

Jeff stripped to the waist and washed carefully. "Where are the hostlers?" he asked as he dried himself.

"Donaciano is out hunting a strayed mule. Hernan is cleaning the stables. Pete Willis is sleeping off a drunk."

Jeff pulled on his flannel shirt and buttoned it. "Pete still living in the land of

These great minds were Rosicrucians



Francis Bacon Benjamin Franklin Isaac Newton

**WHAT SECRET POWER
DID THEY POSSESS?**

Why were these men great?

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alcoholic dreams, or is it nightmares now?"

"Yeh. But hell, Jeff, he knows horses, ain't afraid of any 'Pache that ever lived and knows this country like the palms of his dirty hands. I can't get rid of him."

Jeff swiftly tied his string tie and brushed his hair. "Anything come to light lately?"

Sherm inspected his cigar. "You mean about Chris Wellman?"

"Yes."

"No. Pete went out once or twice. Didn't find anything. I didn't think he would."

"Why?"

"Whoever did the job is slickern' a greased hog, Jeff. He's high-tailed it out of this country by now."

Jeff nodded. He thrust a hand into the pocket of his trousers and fingered the slug he had dug out of his saddle. "I suppose."

They went back into the common room. Donaciano Avita was seated at the table rolling a cigarette. He smiled at Jeff. "Senor Bellew! You have come through safely again!" he said with a flash of even white teeth.

Jeff waved a hand. "Did you find the mule, Donaciano?"

"No. It is my opinion that the cursed Apaches got him. You know how they like mule meat, and he was a fine fat beast."

Jeff sat down. The mailbags lay where he had left them, but one buckle tab was in a different hole than he remembered placing it. He leaned back in the chair as Sherm brought a bottle and glasses to the table. "Apaches giving you trouble, Donaciano?" asked Jeff as he filled the glasses.

The hostler shrugged. "They are peaceful, but they are still great thieves."

"No tracks, eh?" asked the station master as he sat down.

"To a point, Senor Danby. Beyond that . . . nothing. It was getting dark. I did not wish to meet any Apaches myself so I came back."

"Long hunt?" asked Jeff casually.

Donaciano looked at him quickly. "A

few hours. No more. Darkness fell."

Joan brought out a tray and served them. The faint odor of lilac came to Jeff as she leaned past him. He couldn't help thinking it was a hell of a place for a good-looking young woman to be buried in, associating with hostlers, drunks, and the miscellaneous riffraff that came through the pass. They ate silently, and she came out again to get the plates, placing a pie on the table. She shuddered a little as Donaciano thrust a dirty hand beneath a piece of pie and began to eat it, dripping the juice on the tablecloth and his soiled buckskin charro jacket. "Apple pie," said Sherm as he helped himself to a slice. "Joanny makes it with flavored soda crackers. Her Maw was good at it too."

LATER AS THEY sat at the cleared table, lowering the contents of the bottle, a man came into the common room. He placed his carbine in a corner and nodded to the men at the table. "Howdy, Sherm," he said. Sherman Danby jerked a thumb toward him. "Ross Linder," he said, "meet Jeff Bellew, a government mail carrier."

Ross slapped the dust from his coat with his hat. He was a well-built man, with dark hair and eyes. He moved with easy grace as he came to the table. "Joanny in the kitchen?" he asked.

Sherm nodded. "You eat, Ross?"

"Yes. Came over the mountain from Dry Valley."

"Any luck?"

"No. Going out again tomorrow." Linder walked into the kitchen.

Sherm glanced over his shoulder at the kitchen door. "Ross has been sparkin' Joanny. He's a scout out of Fort Bowie. Been lookin' for horse thieves this last month. Somebody got clean away with five remounts at Bowie some time ago. I wouldn't want *him* on my trail."

"Pretty good, is he?" asked Jeff. He eyed the carbine. Singleshot 45/70 issue

THE DEVIL'S DRAW

Springfield, like thousands of others in Arizona.

Sherm wiped his mouth. "A damned bloodhound. The commandant sent him out a couple of months ago after two horse thieves. Trailed them clean down to the Swisshelms. Came back and said they wouldn't bother Fort Bowie anymore. Hombre told me later he found them in a draw full of lead. Shot in the back they were. I don't know if he did it but I wouldn't put it past him. Queer bird."

"Why do you say that?"

"There was a five hundred dollar reward for them, if brought back for trial. Seems funny a man would throw away five hundred dollars just for the satisfaction of drilling two horse thieves."

Donaciano crossed himself. "There are those who have the mark of blood on them. Blood is worth more than gold to them. It satisfies a hunger they have."

Jeff looked at the kitchen. "Rather an odd hombre for you to let spark your niece, Sherm."

Sherm flushed. "She has a mind of her own. He's got some polish. More than most of us. He was an officer once; or so they say, during the war. Got in some kind of trouble in New Mexico. No one seems to know for sure. One thing they do know: he's a damned dangerous man to cross..."

Jeff picked up his mailbags and crossed the room to get his rifle. He picked up Linder's carbine and looked at it. He had been right. It was a 45/70. "Find something interesting?" a low voice asked. Jeff turned quickly. Linder was standing in the doorway of the kitchen eyeing Jeff. Jeff shook his head. "I never carried one of these in the war while in the cavalry. We had Sharps percussion carbines. Quite an improvement these."

Linder nodded. "A good weapon. Where did you serve?"

"In New Mexico. Third Calvary, the old Mounted Rifles."

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Linder leaned against the side of the door. "New Mexico? Under Canby?"

"Yes. Later we went east to Virginia."

"You weren't in New Mexico in '64 and '65 then?"

"No."

"I served with the Californians there in '64 and '65."

Ross nodded and picked up his Henry rifle. "Good troops," he said. "Taught the Apache and Navajos a good lesson." He went to the passageway and turned. "Good-night, gentlemen. Jeff padded down the passageway to his room and entered it, closed the door behind him, and sat down on the bunk after lighting the candle lantern. He smoked for half an hour. He had learned nothing. He looked out of the narrow window. A man was weaving a little as he walked toward the station house. Pete Willis, a drifter, who lived by the bottle. Jeff had never really seen him sober. Yet he was a skilled man with horse or mule, a veteran Indian fighter and scout. He was better half drunk than most men of his trade were when sober. Rumor had it that he spoke Apache like a Chiricahua and had once raided into Mexico with Cochise, having an Apache squaw as his wife, but no one knew for sure. He was like many another drifter in Arizona, a man of shadowed past, minding his own business and making damned sure you minded yours. Jeff opened the mail bags. Nothing was disturbed. Maybe he had been wrong about the buckle. He placed the bags on the cot and pulled off his boots, blowing out the lantern and lying back to watch the moon stream in through the window, making a silver rectangle on the beaten earth floor.

JEFF WAS UP at dawn. He had thirty miles to go to Mineral Springs. Joan Danby was busy in the kitchen when Jeff came into the common room. He dropped the mail bags and placed his rifle in the corner. She came to the door.

"Good morning, ma'am," he said to her.

"I'll have your breakfast ready in a moment."

Jeff went to the outer door and looked down the pass. It was already filling with gray light. No one else was in sight. Ross Linder's rifle was gone. Joan came out of the kitchen and placed his breakfast on the table. She sat down opposite him and filled a cup of coffee for herself. "You have a long ride ahead of you," she said. "Will it be dangerous?"

"To a certain extent. The Apaches usually don't bother a mail carrier. Cochise once agreed to let the mails go through years ago. Since then the Apaches have more or less kept up the custom."

"But you are not sure?"

Jeff smiled. "I have met many Indians who are honorable men. Cochise was. It was no fault of his he went to war again."

"You are an unusual man, Mr. Bellew."

He looked up quickly. "Why?"

Her eyes held his. "You are one of the few men I have met in this territory who would say such a thing about an Apache."

"That makes me unusual?"

She stirred her coffee. "Not only that. There is something about you that doesn't quite seem to fit in with your job. You seem a much more capable man than a mere carrier of mail."

"It is a good job," he said quietly, "an honorable job. The pay is small, the risks great, but we cannot always think of our work in terms of money."

She studied him as he ate. "You will come back here again?"

"Yes. I have this route now."

She gathered up the empty dishes and took them to the kitchen. He shrugged into his jacket and went to the kitchen door. "Goodbye," he said. "Is there anything I can bring for you?"

"No."

"Perfume? Books?"

She smiled. "Are you trying to court me, Mr. Bellew?"

THE DEVIL'S DRAW

"No. Not yet, that is. Have I a chance?"

"I have not been spoken for yet."

"There is Ross Linder."

She finished placing the dishes in the pan and turned. "He is only a friend."

Jeff held out his hand. "Goodbye then."

She crossed the room and took his hand. Jeff experienced an unusual sensation, something he had never felt before. He wanted to draw her close and kiss her. She released his hand. "Will you follow the pass road to the valley?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Be careful then. Is there no other way?"

"I could follow the old army wagon road over Saddleback Ridge." He studied her.

She looked away. "Use your own judgment, Mr. Bellew."

"Why did you ask if there was another way?"

"I was just curious."

"I see. Goodbye then."

As he reached the plank bridge over Roadrunner Creek he turned in the saddle. She was standing in the doorway, the cool wind whipping her gingham skirts about her. The sun had risen, lighting her hair with a golden hue. She waved a hand as he crossed the bridge.

CHAPTER

2

The Gun

A mile from the station he reached the winding road that climbed up over Packsaddle. He drew rein and rolled a cigarette, hunching in the saddle. On an impulse he touched the bay with his spurs and followed the old road, climbing high up through scrub oak and juniper. Two hours later he stopped the bay for a breather. He slid from the saddle and walked over to the edge of the cliff along which the road ran. The pass was far below him. The foothills at the end of the pass gleamed like the bones of long dead

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men. Cuchillo Peak cast a long shadow to the west. Beyond Cuchillo the range rose in serried ranks to the north. The peaks were bald and naked except for sparse timber growing on their lower slopes. The pass wound through a jumbled mass of rock, some of the slopes riven by tremendous forces of ages past. The road was a frayed gray ribbon between precipitous walls of cracked rock, framed by tangled brush and the silvery thread of Roadrunner Creek. Pines, manzanita, spruces, scrub oak and aspen showed in the lower reaches of the pass. Jeff studied the pass. Suddenly he ran back to his horse and took his fieldglasses from their case. He dropped behind a rock and rested his elbows on it, focussing the glasses on a rock shoulder which hung above the road. A man moved about in the brush. The sun glinted dully from the barrel of a rifle. He was too far away from Jeff for him to distinguish any features. He disappeared in the scrub brush and then reappeared farther down the slope to lie flat behind a rock, looking up the pass. Jeff whistled softly. She had warned him. What did she know? He rolled a cigarette and slowly smoked it. Who could it be? Ross Linder? Pete Willis? Herman Donaciano? Sherm Danby? None of them had been about the station when he had left. Some of them must have been asleep. But who? Jeff walked back to his horse. It was no use going down into the pass now. The man would see him long before he got within enough distance to identify him. The answer to the murder of Chris Wellman *must* be at Dragoon Pass station.

Jeff reached Mineral Springs with no incident. It was as though he were riding on the moon. The country was deserted. He bunked at the hotel that night and in the morning went to the postoffice. Phil Webster, the postmaster, took Jeff into his office. "Anything happen?" he asked.

"I was nearly dry-gulched in Dragoon Pass."

Phil leaned forward. "Did you see who it was?"

"No. On top of that I think there was someone waiting for me at the lower end of the pass. I took the old army road up over Saddleback and saw him waiting in the pass."

"You had me worried stiff. You were hours late."

Jeff grinned. "Better to be hours late than to be lying in the pass with a slug through me."

"I don't envy you your job, Jeff."

Jeff rolled a cigarette. "I like it."

Phillip Webster suddenly stood up. "For the love of god! The east bound coach went through that pass hours ago."

Jeff looked up. "So?"

"They were carrying cash for the mine payroll at Silver Valley! Seven thousand dollars of it!"

"They've got a man riding shotgun on it, haven't they?"

"Yes."

"Any passengers?"

"Business has been bad. That's why they took the payroll delivery job. There was one man aboard as passenger."

Jeff paced back and forth. "You don't think they'd try to jump the coach?"

"They? Who are you talking about?"

"Look, Phil. I may have a lead. I didn't like the looks of some of the men around the swing station."

"Sherm Danby is all right."

"What about the others?"

Phil shrugged. "The usual rum lot."

"Do you know Ross Linder?"

"Yes. Why?"

"He was up there last night."

"Linder is a queer duck but he's a trusted army scout. I don't think we have anything to fear from him."

Jeff rubbed his jaw. Something told him he should go back. "Look, Phil! Can you get a man to take this mail on to Tucson?"

"I can place it on the westbound stage this afternoon."

THE DEVIL'S DRAW

"Good. I'm going back right now."
Phil looked at him queerly. "You think something will happen?"

"How should I know? It's silly to ride on into Tucson with a bag or two of mail when my job is to find the killers of Chris Wellman."

"True. Can I help in any way?"

"When Chris was killed, who found the body?"

"George Endries. He's a wagon contractor."

"He brought the body here?"

"Yes."

"What did the autopsy show?"

"Hit in the back with a .54 caliber slug. Penetrated the lung. The shot was fired at about a hundred yards, according to Doc Sawyer."

"Did he keep the slug?"

PHIL opened a drawer and took out a bullet. He threw it to Jeff. Jeff took the slug out of his pocket and compared them. They were the same. "Curious looking slugs," he said.

Phil nodded. "That's why I saved it."

"Do you know what type of gun fired it?"

"No. Charley Good might know. He's the local gunsmith."

"I'll go see him. Then I'm going back to the pass."

"Alone?"

"Yes. It might be better that way. By the way, as far as you're concerned, I took the mail on to Tucson. Have you a spare set of mail saddlebags?"

"Pick up that pair out in the office."

Jeff hurried out of the postoffice and went down the street to the gunsmith. Charley Good nodded as he saw Jeff's badge. "Be glad to help," he said.

Jeff placed the slugs on the old man's workbench. "What type of gun fired those?"

Charley examined them. "Fifty-four caliber. Burnside I'd say."

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"Burnside? What kind of gun is that?"

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"You're a walking encyclopedia on firearms, Charley."

"It's my business."

"Are there many of these kicking about?"

"Not out here. Fact that's the first I've seen in many a year."

"One more thing. Whose is it?"

Charley turned to a battered filing cabinet and thumbed through it. He pulled out a soiled card. "Here it is. Belongs to Sherman Danby. He's station master up at Dragoon Pass. You know him?"

"Yes," said Jeff slowly, "Yes, I do." He closed the breech of the weapon and placed it on the bench.

"Was I any help?"

Jeff looked at the old man. "Yes. Very much help." He looked at the carbine. "When was it brought in here?"

Charley glanced at the card. "Three weeks ago. Dropped off by the stage driver. Needed a new front sight."

Jeff breathed easier. The slug that had

hit his saddle had been from a Burnside, but if the weapon on Charley's bench had been in there three weeks it was a cinch Sherman Danby hadn't been able to use it on Jeff. He rubbed his jaw. "You know anyone else that might have one of these?"

Charley scratched his head. "No. As I said, this is the first one I've seen in many a year."

Jeff left the gunshop and went to get his horse. He threw the empty mail bags over the bay's rump and strapped them tight. He had an appointment in Dragoon Pass.

Jeff rode the bay hard that day, reaching the entrance to the gloomy pass in the early evening. The moon was trying to poke through a heavy bank of clouds when he entered the pass. A cold wind swept mournfully through the gorge as he followed the road. He didn't see the overturned coach until he rounded a bend, and the moon crept out from behind the clouds. He reined in the bay and dropped the reins, jerking his Henry rifle free and padding forward on foot. A man lay face downward in the road. Three arrows protruded from his back. His hands were clawed into the loose earth in front of him. Another man was in the coach, his sightless eyes staring up at Jeff as he looked in. Both dead men had smashed heads, the sign of an Apache killing, the warriors making sure the dead men could not return to haunt them. Jeff faded into the brush and studied the landscape. The glint of metal, shining in the moonlight, caught his eye in the brush on the far side of the road. He crossed the road quickly and knelt beside the third dead man. He had been shot through the chest. Jeff pulled out his clasp knife and probed into the wound. The slug popped out on the tip of the long blade. He whistled slowly. It was the same type of slug that had killed Chris Wellman and that had been fired at him. A Burnside. Jeff looked up the silent pass. It cleared Danby, at any event, but he doubted if the killer had been an Apache. He went back to the coach. The boot was

THE DEVIL'S DRAW

empty except for some luggage. The place under the seat was empty. The cash box or bag had been taken, the horses cut from their harness. Jeff went back to the bay and swung up on him.

He rode through the shadowy trees until he could see the station, perching on its rock shoulder, its walls gleaming whitely in the moonlight. He led the bay into the trees and went back to watch the station. There were no lights. A mule bawled from the corral. Jeff scratched his jaw. On an impulse he got the bay and led him through the trees toward the east end of the pass.

He cleared the station by a mile and rode to the place where Chris had died. He picked the bay and took his rifle, climbing up the side of the pass and casting about through the moonlit brush. He found nothing. Suddenly he noticed a cave in the jumble of rocks higher above him. He climbed up to it and went in, holding his rifle cocked and ready. It was empty. He lit a lucifer. His right boot rolled on something. He picked it up. It was an empty brass hull, tapered from the slug end, with a corroded hole at the butt end. He found three more in the sand of the cave. Beyond the sand was a pile of rocks. He looked over them. A canvas bag lay on the ground, its top neatly cut off and the lock lying in the bag. The lock was stamped SILVER VALLEY MINE CO. Jeff whistled. It must be the lock from the payroll bag.

Jeff left the cave. The spot where Chris had been found was no more than one hundred and fifty yards from the cave. The doctor who had examined Chris' body had said he had been hit from a range of about a hundred yards. Jeff went down the slope and got Dandy. He stood for a long time thinking. He was due back up the pass late the next day. He mounted Dandy and rode back toward the station, picketing the bay in a thick grove of scrub oaks. He walked to a place where he could watch the station. Light now showed through the

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windows and a man moved about the corral. He settled down to watch the station. About midnight a man rode up to the station, his horse's hooves making low thunder on the plank bridge. He turned his horse into the corral and went into the station.

CHAPTER

3

Blood and Death

Jeff slept in the grove that night, arising at dawn to continue his watch. All that day he watched the station through his glasses. Sherman Danby was there, the three hostlers and Joan. Danby must have known something had happened to the eastbound coach, which had been due there long ago, but life moved on at the station as though nothing had happened. In the late afternoon Jeff rode down the pass, returning when it was dusk. He rode across the plank bridge. Pete Willis came out of the stable and watched him as he turned the bay loose in the corral. "Everything all right, Jeff?" he asked.

Jeff pulled the mailbags from the bay and shook his head. "Found the eastbound stage overturned. Three dead men. Didn't you know about it?"

Pete rubbed his bristly jaw. "No. . . . We wondered what had happened to it. Figured maybe they hadn't sent it through. Who done it?"

"'Paches, from the looks of things. Sherm in?"

"Yeh." Pete watched Jeff walk to the station. Then he shambled into the corral.

Sherm Danby looked up from the table as Jeff entered. "*You?* So soon?"

Jeff nodded as he placed his mailbags on a chair. Sherm was half drunk. "Why?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

"Did you know the eastbound stage was lying in the pass with three dead men around it?"

Sherm shook his head slowly. "I wondered why they hadn't been through."

"Didn't you make an effort at all to go

and see what had happened to them?"

"Why should I? They haven't been keeping a regular schedule." Danby eyed Jeff as he sat down.

"You'd better notify Fort Bowie."

Sherm nodded. "I'll send Hernan there tomorrow."

There was a movement in the kitchen. Joan stood in the doorway. Her face was pale. "Hello, Jeff," she said quietly.

"Hello," he said. Something was wrong. There was an air of tension about the place.

"Are you staying here tonight, Jeff?"

"Where the hell else would he go with the Apaches up?" asked Danby sourly.

"I'll get you some food, Jeff," she said. She turned back into the kitchen.

After Jeff had eaten he and the station master sat at the table smoking. Danby drank steadily. Jeff had a few drinks with him. Later Jeff went to his room, bolting the door behind him. There was something wrong, of that he was sure. He lay on his bunk for half an hour until he heard someone ride across the bridge. Jeff went quickly to the narrow window. It was Ross Linder. He went into the station. A few minutes later Jeff heard soft footfalls in the passageway. He went to the door and drew his Colt. He listened tensely. Someone was just beyond the door breathing softly. Suddenly there was a rap at the door. "Who is it?" asked Jeff.

"Joan. Let me in. Quickly!"

She came into the room and waited until he bolted the door. "You must get out of here at once, Jeff!"

"Why?"

"You will be murdered. For this." She touched the mailbags.

"Who is going to do it?"

She hesitated. "Ross Linder is here."

"Yes?"

"You are in a nest of thieves and murderers."

"Linder?"

"Yes, and the others, too."

THE DEVIL'S DRAW

"Your uncle, is he in it, also?"

She looked away. "Yes. He is as bad as the others."

"Did they kill Chris Wellman?"

"One of them did."

"Who?"

"I do not know, but I do know they did it."

"What about the stagecoach?"

"Yes! Yes! There is nothing you can do now. You must go!"

"Why did you come here?"

She came close. "I have thought of you often. I don't want to see you killed too."

Jeff grinned. "I found out what I came for. They may have a little trouble killing me."

"You don't understand. They are all in it. My uncle, Ross, Donaciano, Hernan, and Pete Willis. What chance do you have?"

"I have been warned."

She placed a hand on his arm. "You are not just a mail carrier, Jeff."

"No. I am a postal inspector, sent here to find the killers of Chris Wellman."

She went to the door and listened. "They plan to kill you later on tonight and then leave for Sonora."

"And you?"

"I will be forced to go with them."

"Tell me all you know."

SHE sat down on the bunk and looked at the floor. "My uncle was paymaster of a regiment in New Mexico near the end of the war. The soldiers had confiscated rebel property there. He had thousands of dollars entrusted to him. Ross Linder was a captain in the same regiment. He got my uncle drunk and talked him into deserting with the money. A guard was killed in their escape. My uncle and Ross got to Arizona, and Ross betrayed him, taking the money. My uncle lost trace of him for years. He worked hard here, trying to forget and then found out that Ross was at

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Fort Bowie. He could do nothing. Ross swore he would turn him in to the authorities for what he had done in New Mexico. My uncle is afraid of him. He is a killer. Ross uses this station as a base for his activities, forcing my uncle to help him. He talked him into the stagecoach robbery. My uncle refused to go. Some of the others worked with Ross, making it look like an Apache attack. They got the money. They plan to go down into Sonora."

"We'll see about that!"

"You must get away."

Jeff took his head. "No. If they get away we may never get our hands on them again. I'm sorry about your uncle though."

She stood up. "So am I, but he must pay for what he has done."

"Go back about your duties. If shooting starts, get out of the house and hide. If anything happens to me you must get a horse and try to reach Fort Bowie."

She nodded. Suddenly Jeff drew her close and kissed her. She placed her arms about his neck and drew him close. "Be careful." Then she was gone.

Jeff went to the window. The adobe was eroded. He slid his rifle through the window and squirmed through, ripping his shirt and abrading his skin. He had just picked up his rifle when he heard faint voices. The door of his room opened. He flattened himself against the wall in the shadows.

"Where is that buzzard?" It was Linder.

"Maybe out at the privy," said Sherman Danby. "For God's sake, Ross! Take the mailbags and let him go. I want no more bloodshed."

"You always were chicken-livered. I want no witnesses."

Jeff heard the mailbags being unbuckled. Linder cursed. "Empty! What's up?"

"I think I know. I'll swear he's a government agent!"

"Out of here! Track him down! Kill him! Get the others!" Feet slammed on

the hard earth floor and the door crashed open. Jeff sprinted for the stables. He slid up behind them as Pete Willis came out of the shadows where the privy was. Jeff reversed his rifle and waited. The drunk wandered slowly toward the stables. Jeff suddenly stepped out and swung the rifle hard. Pete went down without a sound. Jeff swiftly gagged and tied him, dragging him into a gully hidden in the brush. One down, four to go. Jeff looked out of the brush. Sherman Danby and Ross were walking toward the corral. Jeff went around the back of the stable. He stepped into the darkness of the stable. "Is that you, Pete?" The voice came from the loft. It was Hernan, the hostler. Jeff coughed. "Yes. Come down. I got somethin' to show you."

"A bottle perhaps? Yes?"

"Yeh. Come on."

Hernan came slowly down the ladder and turned toward Jeff in the shadows. The moon suddenly lit the stable. Hernan cursed as he saw Jeff. He whipped out a knife as Jeff closed in. Jeff gripped the Mexican by his shirt collar and jolted home a right jab. Hernan raked at Jeff with his knife. Jeff leaned back bringing up his knee into the hostler's groin. Hernan gasped and bent forward in time to catch a vicious uppercut. He went down and Jeff dragged him into the back of the stable. He tied him with a riata and gagged him with his own filthy bandanna. Two down, three to go. Jeff went out a back door of the stable and rounded the big building. There was no one in sight. He padded forward toward the station. Feet grated on the hard earth. He turned on a heel to see Danby rushing him with a clubbed rifle. Jeff went under the blow, catching it on his back. As he came up something thudded behind his ear sending him down on his hands and knees. Before he could get up he was hit again, his face smashing down on the hard *caliche*.

He came to in the common room. He

THE DEVIL'S DRAW

was lashed to a chair. Ross Linder straddled a chair backwards, resting his chin on his elbows. He eyed Jeff sardonically as he came to. "Postal inspector, eh?" he asked. "I had a feeling you weren't a damned mail carrier."

Jeff shook his head a little to clear it. Sherm Danby came into the room from the kitchen. He wiped Jeff's face with a cold wet rag. "Sorry, Jeff," he said quietly.

"Listen to him," jeered Linder, "guilty as hell and he makes like a Good Samaritan."

Jeff looked at the killer. "I suppose I'll get it in the back too?"

"What made you think we gave to anyone else in the back?"

Jeff looked past Linder. A carbine, fitted with a telescopic sight, leaned against the wall. It was the same kind of a sight he had seen Berdan's Sharpshooter's use in the Virginia campaigns. It was a Burnside, the exact duplicate of the one he had seen in Mineral Springs. "Is there any doubt of it?" asked Jeff quietly.

"How'd you find out?" asked Sherm. He dabbed at his sweat-dewed face with the rag.

"Chris Wellman was shot with a Burnside like that one there. Someone potted at me with the same kind of gun. One of the men in the stagecoach had been shot with one. Figures, doesn't it?"

Danby touched Jeff's shoulder. "It ain't mine. I swear it."

"You've got one just like it," said Linder with a crooked grin. "Who's to say you didn't kill them?"

"I am," said Jeff.

Ross scowled. "You? How did you know?"

"Danby's Burnside is in Mineral Springs. Has been for weeks. That answer your question?"

"It does and it also signs your death warrant, hombre. Where is Donaciano?"

Danby pointed to the north. "Getting



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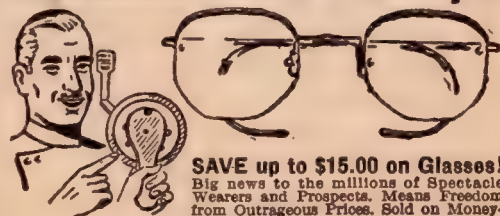
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the loot. He shouldn't be very long now."

Ross hit the floor with a crash. "You damned ass! I don't trust him or anyone else around here!"

"Dammit! I trust Donaciano a helluva sight more than I do you!"

Linder whipped out his Colt and rammed into Danby's belly. He grinned as he cocked it. "One of these days, Sherm, I'll let daylight through you. I'll place the slug so that you'll live a long time in agony before you die."

"Shoot, you murderer!"

ROSS let down the hammer of his Colt slowly and thrust it into its holster. "No. I don't want that starry-eyed niece of yours hating me for the rest of my life."

"What makes you think she'll be with you the rest of your life?"

Linder grinned. "What in hell's name do you think I'm guiding you all down to Sonora for? For the money alone? For you, you spineless jackass? I want her!"

Joan appeared in the kitchen door. "Have I nothing to say, Uncle Sherman?"

The station master flushed. He stepped back from Linder.

"Do I?" she asked again.

Linder leaned against the wall. "He'll do as I say if he doesn't want to stretch hemp at Fort Bowie. Get your clothes together. We ride in half an hour."

She looked at her uncle. He looked away and sank into a chair, holding his head in his hands. His body shook a little.

The door banged open. Ross moved like a cat, drawing and cocking his Colt. It was the hostler, Donaciano. He grinned. "So, we have another prisoner. Senor Bellew."

"Did you get the stuff, Donaciano?" asked Ross.

"Si. Of course. Pete and Hernan are saddling the horses. It is with them."

Jeff looked at the tall Mexican out of the corner of his eye. He was lying. But why? Donaciano rolled a cigarette and thrust it into Jeff's mouth. He leaned forward to

light it. "A man should go out of this world with the memory of a good woman, a strong drink, or a good smoke. We have no woman for you, hombre, and I would not like to see you die drunk. Therefore I give you a last smoke." He leaned closer. "Get ready," he said. He stepped back and drew his knife, testing the edge on his thumb. Suddenly he smashed at the harp lamp, shattering the globe. The room was plunged into darkness. It reeked of hot oil. Jeff felt the knife slip beneath his bonds, cutting them. Blood ran down his wrists. Ross cursed. A revolver cracked. Donaciano grunted. Jeff leaped to his feet. A slug whispered past his face. He threw himself to one side and felt for the Burnside carbine. Three shots blasted the darkness, revealing Ross standing in the doorway of the passage. Joan screamed. Danby pushed her into the kitchen. "After him, amigo!" shouted Donaciano from the floor. Ross ran down the passage. Jeff fired after him, gripping the empty carbine. He darted into his room and snatched up his Colt, ripping it from its holster. The passage door banged open as he reached the door of his room. He ran after the outlaw. Ross was making for the corral. Danby ran out of the kitchen door with a rifle in his hands. Jeff fired twice. Ross stumbled and went down on one knee. He fired from the ground. The heavy slug slapped into Jeff's left shoulder, spinning him about. He went back against the wall, sickened by the heavy blow of the bullet. Ross got to his feet and drew a knife. "Get him, Sherm!" he shouted. He ran forward, his face a mask of killing lust in the moonlight. Jeff tried to raise his pistol but could not get it up. Danby cocked his rifle, throwing it up to his shoulder. It cracked, and Ross Linder grunted as the slug smashed into his chest. He sprawled flat and tried to get up. Sherman Danby paced forward, levering another cartridge into the repeater. He fired at ten feet, loaded again and stopped over the prostrate killer. Deliberately he fired into

THE DEVIL'S DRAW

Linder's head. He looked at Jeff. His face was set as though he had just awakened from a nightmare. "Take me in," he said.

Jeff eyed the big man. "Get out of here," he said, "while you have the chance. I have the man I want."

Jeff wadded his bandanna over the wound in his shoulder. The Mexican was gripping a bloody forearm tightly. His face was a mask of pain. "It is just as well. Linder was the ringleader."

Joan ran out of the station and set to work on Jeff's wound. Donaciano leaned against the wall. "I am Rodrigo Barriero, Deputy U.S. Marshal from New Mexico. Sent here to find Ross Linder. It was good that I came in time, eh, amigo?"

Jeff nodded. "I am a U.S. Postal Inspector, here on the same mission."

The Mexican winced, gripping his arm. "I thought it was up to me alone. I am glad we worked together on this. The money is hidden. We will get it tomorrow. I knew something was going on when I found Pete and Hernan. I am glad Senor Danby has escaped. Linder was the killer in all instances."

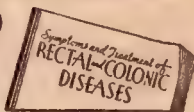
Jeff looked at Joan as she finished bandaging his shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said.

She brushed back a wisp of hair. She looked down into the pass. "Poor man," she said. "His life has been hell since the war, always living in fear of the law. I didn't know about it until today."

Rodrigo touched her shoulder. "He will never come back," he said gently.

Jeff got to his feet and leaned back against the wall. She came close to him, and he put his good arm about her. He had found more than the killers of Chris Wellman. He was a lucky cuss. Rodrigo winked at him over Joan's shoulder as he knotted a bandage about his left forearm with his teeth. "Perhaps I may dance at a wedding soon," he said, "I have not had much fun working here. It is a fitting end to this tale of blood and death." ● ● ●

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(Continued from page 85)

"The same," he murmured. His smile was like a chill wind blowing against me.

He was medium tall and had a compact, wire-lean body. His hair beneath his precisely angled John B. was a tawny yellow that paled to the faintest shading of gray at his temples. His face was incredibly smooth and fine textured, almost like a boy's. He could have been twenty-five or fifty. His eyes, steady on mine with their pressure of amused malice, were a peculiar shade of green-gray, like water pooled below melting ice.

This, then, was Matt McKenna, the most dreaded of them all.

There was a rising rush of sound in my ears that I had heard once before in my life. It was when I was a youngster wading in McDonogh's mill pond and had walked over a step-off; I had felt myself plunging deep into the cold dark water, turning and twisting, with my lungs screaming for air as I tried to thresh my way back to the surface. That heavy, drumming wind-rushing sound had been in my ears that day, and it had been fear, real and terrible.

There was a tightness in my throat, and I had to force my voice through it. "Mind telling me what business brought you to Spurlock, Mr. McKenna?"

He shrugged his neat shoulders. "Just wanted to look the place over."

I was aware that several people on the street had stopped and were looking curiously in our direction.

I said, "We've got a quiet town here." "So?"

"I want to keep it that way."

"Why, that's fine," McKenna murmured in his gently derisive way. "That's just fine, mister sheriff."

The wind was beating heavily in my ears. "Just so we understand each other," I said. There seemed to be a singing thinness in my voice, and I took a full breath to steady it. "I'll be around if you need me, Mr. McKenna."

His eyes turned very bright, and he laughed softly. "I wonder if you will be, mister sheriff—when I'm ready for you?"

THEY ARE all different in the way they go after a man when they want to break him or kill him. It's a kind of trademark that identifies each gunman, a sort of brand by which his gun work is marked and remembered.

Kid Antrim, that Lincoln County special they called Billy the Kid, would go after his man with a rattlesnake's singleness of purpose, his buck-toothed grin as deadly as his gun. Doc Holliday just didn't give a damn, a gambler who found dark pleasure in laying his life on the line and then copping all bets with his sawed-off shotgun. Clay Allison was the rash and reckless one, with a sense of humor as thorny as cholla; they say he once rode naked through a Texas town just to show his contempt for its law.

But this Matt McKenna was a different breed. Patience was the key to him and he used it as a weapon, a brutal, tearing thing that inexorably gouged the courage out of a man, piece by piece. He had a trick of watching you unblinkingly with his cool, mocking gaze so that you knew that some day, at his pleasure, he was going to force you to draw on him—of coming up behind you when you were off guard, of keeping you on edge by following you around at night when the streets were dark. Always chewing on your nerves with his soft, derisive laugh, and ragging your control with the gentle malice of his voice.

That was how McKenna worked on a man. It was something infinitely more brutal than Billy the Kid's sneering insults when he was forcing a fight, or Clay Allison's sudden gusty rakehell flare of temper. It is the knowing and waiting that hurts.

McKenna's way was to cut at you from the inside, relentlessly nibbling away at your nerves and building up the tortures

DEATH WAITS HERE

of uncertainty and fear in your mind and soul. He was as implacable as an open grave, and I ought to know. I'll never forget the man.

After those first crisp mornings of frost, the days turned off warm again, the sun bright on the golden aspens and flaming sycamores along Refugio creek. Cattle were being pushed down from the mountain graze to the lower valleys, and rangemen were in town placing their orders for winter feed and other necessities.

I avoided McKenna as much as possible, knowing full well that by staying close to my office I was starting the town talking. It's funny how brave most folks are when they're not feeling the pressure personally. I knew what Spurlock was beginning to whisper about me, and I didn't like it. But neither did I want to die just to inflate some gunfighter's ego and prestige and to prove my own courage. There are any number of proud brave fools planted up on Cemetery Hill, and I didn't want to join them just to put another notch in McKenna's reputation as a town tamer. I wasn't too proud to stay close to my office, rather than walk the streets and show my hackles every time McKenna batted his eyes at me.

I WAS sitting at my desk that day when Doc Lufton walked in. He was a short man who carried more weight than was good for him, and was too busy looking after others to take care of his own health. He lowered himself into an empty chair, his face brick-red from the heat, and for a long moment gazed sourly out at the street with his perpetually tired eyes. Then abruptly he broke his silence.

"Jeff, what are you going to do about Matt McKenna?"

I looked up at him in surprise, for Doc was never one to poke into another man's affairs.

"McKenna hasn't broken any laws, so I'm not going to do anything about him."

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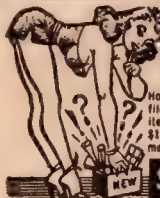
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He gave me a short, irritable glance, and then dug into his coat pocket for a cigar.

"Smoke, Jeff?"

"No, thanks."

"McKenna is out to break you," he said bluntly. "Break you, or kill you. I guess you know that."

I nodded.

He sat there in the old bullhide chair, worrying the cigar between his teeth, watching me morosely.

"Well?" he grunted.

"What do you want me to do, Doc? Go out and call McKenna's hand so he can kill me?"

Lufton's smile was a small, weary one. "That is about what the town is getting around to expecting from you."

"Then to hell with them all!" I said bitterly.

He shook his head and said slowly, "This is your town, Jeff. They're your people out there. As long as you wear that badge, you owe more to them than you do to yourself."

"Not my life, Doc." I looked across at him stonily. "I don't owe them that much, just to amuse some trigger-hungry gun-fighter."

Lufton shifted his bulk uncomfortably in the chair. I knew the worries that were working on him. He was thinking of the town and the good people in it, the women and kids who had a right to decency and security.

Clint Wiggam had clamped a lid on Spurlock, and it was my job to keep the lid down tight. But if I knuckled under to Matt McKenna, then there would soon be other hotheads throwing their weight against Spurlock's law and order, pushing off the lid to make it a wide open town again. That was the shape of the thing, and I knew it as well as Doc Lufton.

And we both knew that Matt McKenna would never stop crowding me. It was the hard and streaky ego in the man that kept him jabbing at me with this thorny malice

and acid derision. He would never be satisfied until he had cracked me wide open and driven me out of town, or killed me.

It was like some kind of virulent hunger goading him against me and what my badge stood for in Spurlock, as though I were a challenge to the reputation he had built up in a dozen other trail towns along the line. He was entirely aware of the speculative gossip he had stirred up on the street, and on that he fed that unrelenting, overblown vanity that made all gun fighters what they were. Clay Allison, John Ringo, Curly Bill Brocius, Billy the Kid—they all had that same supreme egoism driving them on. Like moths flying against a flame. They had to keep forcing another new challenge to help pile up their reputation another notch higher.

Doc Lufton must have been reading the run of my thoughts, for he said slowly, "I think McKenna came here to buck Clint Wiggam, not you. But the street started talking about you and him, and that pushed him over the edge. Gossip started this thing rolling, and now McKenna is out to put an end to it his own way."

I said bitterly, "I've never crossed him in any way."

"That's where you're wrong, Jeff," Doc said. "Clint Wiggam was as tough as any man and had his own reputation with a gun. McKenna could have sidestepped a showdown with Wiggam, and no one would have blamed him or thought much about it. McKenna wouldn't have lost anything. But you're different. You're new to the badge. No name, no reputation, nothing. If McKenna backed down here and left town, he'd be marked the rest of his life, at least in his own mind. He'd have every nobody in the Territory jumping at him, or he imagines he would. You see now how this is?"

I nodded slowly.

The Doc shoved heavily out of his chair, wagging his head. "What gets me is how a man can be more jealous of his reputa-

DEATH WAITS HERE

tion with a gun than he is of the eyes God put in his head. Most men would rather give up anything but the sight of his eyes."

I STARED up from my desk at the Doc. He said moodily, "You witnessed that little ruckus he had with Monte Higgs a couple weeks ago, Jeff. And the tangle he had with Lou Danvers last week. First time he turned and walked right into a card table. Second time he stumbled into the wall before he found the door, and then he wasn't seeing much of where he was going. That's what tipped me off about Matt McKenna."

I didn't understand.

"It's his eyes," Lufton said. "I examined him later that day, and I warned him. I let him have it straight. He's had too much excitement in his time, too much tension and strain. It's done something to his eyes, the nerve centers or blood vessels—hell, I'm just a cowtown doctor and don't know much about such things. But I know enough to make me certain that another ruckus or two will make that man go stone blind."

It's hard to understand how vanity can warp and twist a man. It can make him greedy for gold, or hungry for power and prestige, or jealous above all other things of his reputation as a man-breaker. Matt McKenna had been warned about his eyes, but he remained bleakly willing to sell even his sight in order to force me into a fight that would see me dead or maimed.

Knowing about his eyes seemed to make him more intent than ever to crowd me into a showdown. It turned him more malevolent in the way he watched me, sharpening the derisive scorn of his voice to a biting, vicious edge. I took more from him those days than I had ever taken from any other man. I was afraid of him, and the town knew it. But I wasn't yellow, which was what folks soon got around to thinking. A man can swallow a lot of pride

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when he's got a man like McKenna after him and wants to stay alive.

The few times I saw Molly Danvers during those days, it was plain that things were going no better between her and Lou. Her face had lost the fine color I had seen in it the day she got off the train. There were deep shadows under her eyes, and lines etched around her mouth that aged her and took the beauty out of her face. She had the twins back with her again, and I knew it was only because of the boys that she was staying with Lou.

I hated Danvers for what he was doing to Molly, and it was all I could do to keep from showing it. Lou was a big, overly handsome man, with a mean streak in him when he was drinking, which seemed to be about all the time. An arrogant man, with all the toughness he needed to back it up. Dangerous with a gun, and proud of it.

I was going past the Keg House that day when I heard a man's sudden ripping shout up over the saloon where the Danvers lived. It was Lou's harsh, temper-flaring cursing. Something heavy, like a table or chair, crashed against the upper wall, and a window shattered. I heard the fragment of Molly's torn outcry, "No . . . please, Lou!" And then the panicked screaming of the twins.

I broke into a run that took me through the saloon's winged doors. The place was crowded with ranchers and cowhands, and I saw Matt McKenna spin away from the bar to catch me with his acid, jeering challenge. Everything was frozen like that—the ranchers and punchers trying to ignore Lou Danvers' wild raving upstairs, the two men who had halted uncertainly on the stairs, and Matt McKenna staring at me with narrowing malice.

I think every man in the room heard what he said as he came across in his silk-smooth way to cut me off from the stairs.

"Just a family brawl, mister sheriff," he said gently. "You've had your tail tucked between your legs too long to try to act

like a he-dog now. You'll get your nose skinned if you go up there, mister sheriff."

Upstairs, Lou Danvers' harsh raving broke out again, and I heard Molly's choked cry of pain. Something crashed heavily, like a piece of furniture over-turned, and there was the racket of running and the panicked in-and-out screams of the twins. I rammed McKenna out of my way with a swing of my arm, and heard his brittle flare of temper.

"You, Crawford, I've had my fill of you!"

I broke through the crowd and knocked aside the two men on the stairs, thinking only of Molly.

AFTERWARDS, you look back on a thing like that with a kind of wondering unreality, as though it hadn't really happened at all. You remember, like the tag-end of a nightmare, the fear and hate slashing through you. You remember the twins huddled in the far corner, screaming hysterically, faces white and eyes wide with a terror no child should ever know. You remember the smashed chair and table, the overturned dresser in the bedroom, its mirror spider-webbed with cracks. You remember the toppled chairs and litter of broken dishes that had been left in the wake of Lou Danvers' wild rage as he had plunged through the kitchen and down the rear stairway after his wife.

You remember yourself stumbling down those stairs with the high sun hitting you with its hard glare. You remember all these things, but forever afterwards you are never quite able to believe them. Only the grave you can see up on Cemetery Hill is real, nothing else.

I saw Molly trapped against the long hitch rail as I broke out of the narrow alley beside the saloon. I saw Lou Danvers rising up out of the dust of the street where he had been tripped as he rushed past Matt McKenna toward his wife.

(Continued on page 110)

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(Continued from page 108)

These things I saw as I halted near the two men—the black, senseless rage storming through Lou Danvers' face, and the way McKenna accepted the man's fury, coldly, contemptuously, almost eagerly. There was a vein, dark and swollen, pulsing across McKenna's temple, and there was a taut, honed brilliance, a too-bright challenge, leaping through his eyes—a gun-fighter balanced and keyed for the ultimate test.

I yelled at them both. "Stop it, you two! McKenna, this is no affair of yours!"

I saw Danvers, his rage a huge goaded thing that was beyond all rational thought, reach savagely for his gun. I lunged at him, between him and McKenna. I drove my fist to his body, once and then again, and slugged at his jaw. He buckled and went down.

I turned sharply on McKenna. "You've made too many big tracks in this town, fellow. I'll tell you just once—pack up your gear and leave. Today, now! Don't ever come back."

He swung his intense, too-bright gaze on me. His laugh was slow and soft. A pleased, sardonic shadow of a laugh.

"Why, mister sheriff, this is what I've been waiting for."

Then he was looking past me. A gun-fighter's trick, I thought. His hand dipped

and rose with that incredible speed and sureness that had given him his name. I felt the wind of the bullet, and heard a man's broken cry close behind me.

I turned, and it was Lou Danvers who had taken the bullet, his gun still up for the shot he had meant to put in my back.

I heard McKenna's voice, almost a whisper. "It was one time too many. The Doc told me. You try to take just one more town . . . and all of a sudden there's nothing left."

I'll always remember Matt McKenna standing there on the corner of Arapaho and Main, with his John B. tilted back on his yellow hair so that the sun could strike full into his face. The sunlight, even at its brightest, never bothered him any.

He always seemed to look out beyond the town, toward the green hills of the Basin, then up above the range toward the pines on the Three Sisters, toward the top-most crags thrusting up tall and proud against the blue of the sky. Those were the things that seemed to pleasure him most, and I'll never forget how he kept his face always toward them.

I think it was Molly who understood him better than anyone else in Spurlock. What she said once after the twins were grown always stuck in my mind. Some men, like Matt McKenna, never learn to see until they have lost their sight. ● ● ●

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(Continued from page 10)

they were out at the ranch—hadn't her husband just beat her up?

"Thanks," Wyatt Earp said, and grabbed his bronc. He hollered, "Come on, men, we got a clue."

Meanwhile Pete Spence, unknown to Indian Charlie, had taken to the hills, suspecting such a move from his wife. Indian Charlie, along with others on the ranch, were taken by Earp and his gang, and lined up for questioning. Indian Charlie, sensing his hard luck had really hit him, took on the run for the brush.

"I'll get him," a man said.

The man, named McMasters, was a deadly rifle-shot. Now his Winchester came up, he let the sights fall into line, and his finger squeezed the trigger. Indian Charlie went down in a hurry.

"Creased him," McMasters murmured.

Earp and the rifleman went over to where

the halfbreed lay. McMasters had shot a furrow across the halfbreed's thick skull. Within minutes, they were questioning Indian Charlie, who spoke only Spanish. McMasters could speak fluent Spanish and within a few minutes he had tripped Indian Charlie into identifying himself and admitting he had held the broncs when the ambushers had killed Morgan Earp.

"You just held the broncs, eh?"

"Sure, I jus' hold horses."

"How much?" Wyatt Earp asked.

"Twenty five bucks."

That hit Earp hard. Later he reported he had been going to turn Indian Charlie loose.

"For twenty-five bucks you'd kill a man?"

"They pay me—"

Earp looked at McMasters. "Give him his .45. Tell him we're going to have ten paces between us. Tell him you'll count to

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three in Spanish. He can draw on count two, I draw on *three*. I can't let him go."

This information was relayed to Indian Charlie. He packed two .45s. He could use them, too.

"*Bueno*. Good!"

McMasters watched the two men separate the required distance. By this time all hands watched in deadly interest. All attention was riveted on the two gunmen. Wyatt Earp's face was dark, and the dark face of Indian Charlie showed a smile.

"My hard luck she be good luck today."

He had reason to be happy. The word of Wyatt Earp was his bond—he would not fire until the count of *tres*.

"*Uno!*"

McMasters spat the word. The gunmen tensed, hands splayed over weapons. Wyatt Earp carried only one pistol, his long-barreled Buntline Special. Indian Charlie's

dark hands were talons hooked over his black gunbutts.

"*Dos!*"

Indian Charlie made his draw. His guns rose, he felt elation—he would kill Earp. Then he heard McMasters bark out the third word.

"*Tres!*"

Wyatt Earp drew. His gun was a rising, living thing—leaping out of leather. Something smashed into Indian Charlie's heart. He probably never knew what hit him. The next thing, he was dead on the ground.

"He never got in a shot," a man gasped.

Wyatt Earp put a fresh cartridge in his shell. "He had hard luck to the end. But to think of it—helping kill a man for twenty-five lousy bucks." He holstered his pistol. "Hit the saddles, men, for we got riding to do."

Behind them, as they rode away, lay the limp body of Indian Charlie. ● ● ●

TRIGGER TIME

(Continued from page 67)

came booming down and one knocked Joe over, almost in the doorway, just as Ollie leaped for the opening.

Joe lashed out with the gun and hit Ollie's foot. Ollie plunged in a fall that sent him crashing into the wall across the hall. He flipped around and his gun bellowed at Joe. Joe felt the burn of lead across his back as he braced his elbow against the flood and fired. He emptied Kroner's gun in a blasting roar. Ollie came to his feet, his gun banging once more into the floor, then he fell forward to sprawl over Joe.

Joe tried to move Ollie's body off him but didn't seem to have the strength, and he lay there propped on his good arm and shook his head, trying to clear the fuzziness. Dimly, he heard the hubbub of yells from the bar room.

"Bernie, damn it," Joe said. "Get this cuss off me."

To Joe it seemed a long time before the weight was off him, and he realized he must have passed out, for he was on a table in the saloon, a crowd of people around him.

"Bernie," Joe said. "Damn it, where's Bernie?"

"Bernie's back there listening to Kroner," a man said grinning. "Kroner thought he was gut shot and dying. He's giving Bernie an earful. Ollie shot Minor and they all stole them steers. You're clear, Joe."

"Hey, here's the doc," a man yelled.

Men parted to let the bearded man in. Then Joe saw that the doctor wasn't alone. Lin was beside Joe, her hands soft on his face. "Joe," she said. "Oh, darling . . ."

She kissed him, and Joe grinned and winked at the room at large. "Run that doc out of here," he said. "I feel good enough to holler."

Instead, he kissed Lin again, and that made him feel even better. ● ● ●

RIDE THE DARK TRAIL

(Continued from page 59)

most at arm's length. The lawyer had a cocked six-shooter in his hand.

"Damn you, Gilroy!" he screamed like a maniac. "You started all this."

Tom twisted aside, and DeSpain's bullet only grazed his ribs. He fired as he moved. Then he fired two more shots. All three slugs tore through Lon DeSpain's body. The man stood there, swaying, trying tenaciously to lift his gun again and bring it to bear for another shot, but death rushed on him like a thunderclap. He took one long, unfinished step.

The swirl of battle faded away into the timber as the cattlemen pursued the routed survivors of DeSpain's army.

After a time they came drifting back, nursing their wounds, and dragging a few prisoners at rope's end. They were like men released from hell. They were singing, shouting, and cheering.

They descended on Zeb Leffler who lay on a blanket that Tom had brought from the house. Zeb had an ugly bullet hole in his side. He was pale and pain-racked, but he could still grin and scoff at the idea of dying.

"We licked 'em," Zeb Leffler exulted. "Me an' my kids, an' Tom Gilroy."

"We whupped 'em!" young Jim-Bob added, strutting around like a bantam, "We took on the whole bunch an' give 'em hell!"

"Where's Tom Gilroy?" one of the ranchers demanded. "I want to shake hands with that *hombre*. We owe him a big debt. He showed us that you can't win a fight unless you try. By glory, but we was fools fer lettin' them snakes run a blaze on us fer so long. Where's this fightin' man?"

They looked around. Tom and Betty Leffler were sitting down by the corral and seemed to be talking earnestly. As the cattlemen watched, Tom slid an arm around her and drew her closer. ● ● ●



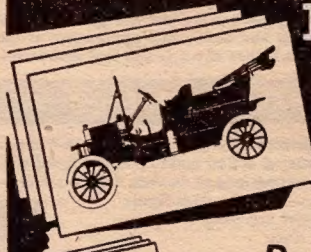
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Figure Slimmer is wonderful for that falling-apart back feeling. It's firm, gentle compressing action makes you feel good and secure and enables you to continue to do your daily work feeling less tired, less broken down. Send for Figure Slimmer now and begin enjoying a figure-slimmed appearance at once.

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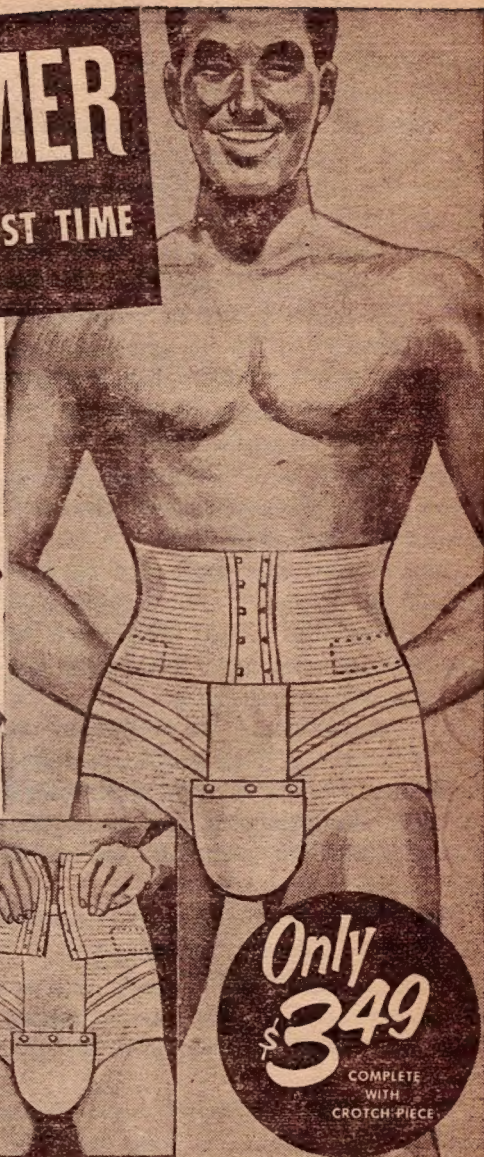
Don't let a heavy weighing-down "corporation" and a balloon waistline get you down. Figure Slimmer flattens your front and takes in inches of your appearance. Clothes will look well on you now!

ADJUSTABLE

Figure Slimmer's adjustable feature makes it easy for you to have a small waistline look. Trousers now look good and fit swell. You can take yourself in more inches if you wish, with this novel adjustable feature.

TRY 10 DAYS SEND NO MONEY

You need risk no money to try Figure Slimmer. Just fill out the coupon and we will rush you the Figure Slimmer by return mail. Wear it for ten days. Then if you are not satisfied with the results you had expected return it and the full purchase price will be refunded. Mail coupon now. Only \$3.49 for waist sizes up to 44. \$3.98 for waist sizes 46 and up. All sizes include crotch piece.



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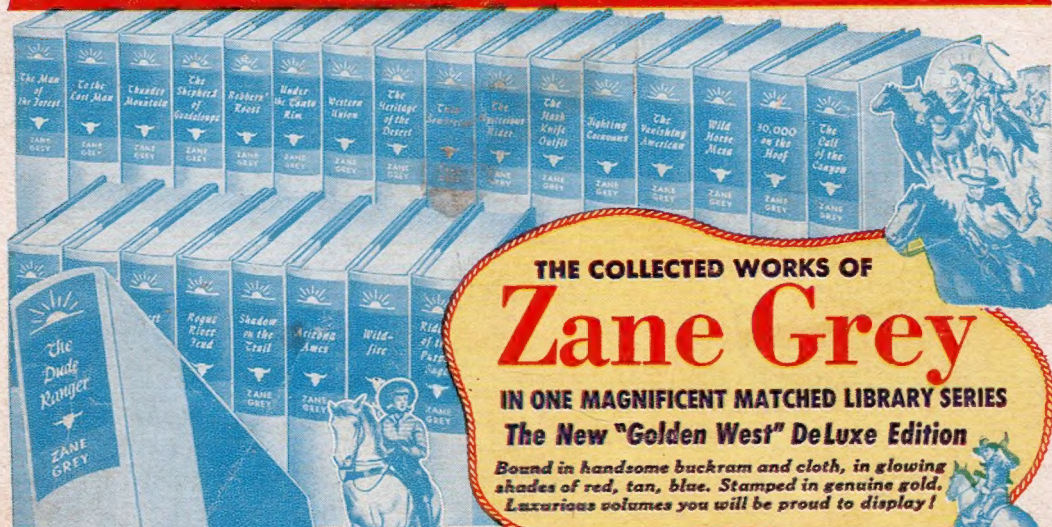
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